

On Becoming a Trusted Advisor

By Leigh A. Mires

When I am curious about an issue, I often go to my computer and do a Google search to see how much information exists on the topic. In this case, I typed in the words “trusted advisor.” I was amazed when approximately 750,000 references popped up.

It seems that everyone in the consulting business these days is talking about being a trusted advisor. The A/E industry is no exception. And with the ever increasing threat of litigation in the industry, how does one go about becoming a consultant that owners and clients trust implicitly?

There are loads of studies on the notion of trust, everything from trust in relationships to trust in government to trust in e-commerce. Researchers have measured the strength of trust against other constructs such as service, technology, and quality. Without fail, trust trumps all of these constructs every time, and does so with so much consistency that behavioral scientists have quit measuring it. So if trust is so important, how does one go about winning it?

Last April, I provided a presentation on this topic at the ACEC Annual Convention in Washington, D.C. I opened the presentation by asking attendees to define the term trusted advisor. What exactly did it mean to them? Participants generated a lot of answers, but the common characteristics mentioned were honesty, integrity, consistency, and being knowledgeable. And while there are many elements that contribute to a trusting relationship, I’ve chosen to focus on just three.

Clients trust those they learn from

Being knowledgeable is one element of building trust. Set in the context of a human relationship this does not mean simply being competent. In order for a trusting relationship to form, knowledge must be *shared* with the client. For example, a structural engineer knows an architect that is chasing a large project. The architect and engineer have not worked extensively together in the past, but the engineer wants to get on the architect’s team for this particular project. The engineer offers to review the architect’s ideas. The engineer sets about describing the challenges and costs of utilizing different structural systems. All of this immensely helpful information was provided openly before the architect won the job. The engineer ended up on the team. The engineer did not win the job by telling the architect that he had done seventeen projects of similar type; he won the job by sharing his knowledge.

“...how does one go about becoming a consultant that owners and clients trust implicitly?”

Unfortunately many of us have a scarcity mentality when it comes to knowledge sharing, meaning that there is only so much knowledge to go around that you plan on hoarding what you know. With clients, knowledge should be “shareware” since everyone is working on the successful achievement of one thing — the project. And as Dale Carnegie wrote back in the 1920s and ‘30s, you have a lot more fun if you help people achieve their goals rather than focusing on your own goals.




Being honest

Let’s consider a case study. A small project with a large client comes in to your firm. The project is a simple strip mall. You are very busy with several large, complex projects. Your firm decided several years ago to quit doing strip malls because these projects did not make money for them. You know you will only make a marginal profit on the project, but it is for a good client that has given you several other large projects where you made a respectable profit. You ask several of your partners how to handle the situation. Partner A says to simply tell the client you don’t do strip malls anymore. Partner B says to give them a high fee and they will go somewhere else. Partner C tells you to call the client and explain to them that you would be happy to do the job, but your firm is so busy right now that you wouldn’t be able to service them to the level they are accustomed. Which is the best answer?

Honesty is another important ingredient in a trusting relationship. It would be easy to follow the advice of Partner A or Partner B in the case study, but calling the client and being honest with them helps further trust in the relationship. But wait a minute! Isn’t turning down work with a good client unbusinesslike behavior? Not in this example. This single act of saying “no” because you wouldn’t be able to give them your best service (and thus risk damaging the relationship) lets the client know that you will be honest with them now and in future transactions.

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It is also important to be honest even in uncomfortable situations. At times, that means admitting that you have messed up. Taking that kind of risk with a client leaves you vulnerable, but trust often grows rather than diminishes out of vulnerability. Many clients appreciate being told when a mistake is made. Being honest, even when it's painful, shows the client what your principles are. People will trust you to the extent that they know what your deeply held values are and that you act in accordance with them. There is a big difference between trusting competence and trusting one's conscience. One engineer I know summed it up perfectly by saying "you never lose when you shoot straight about a screw up."

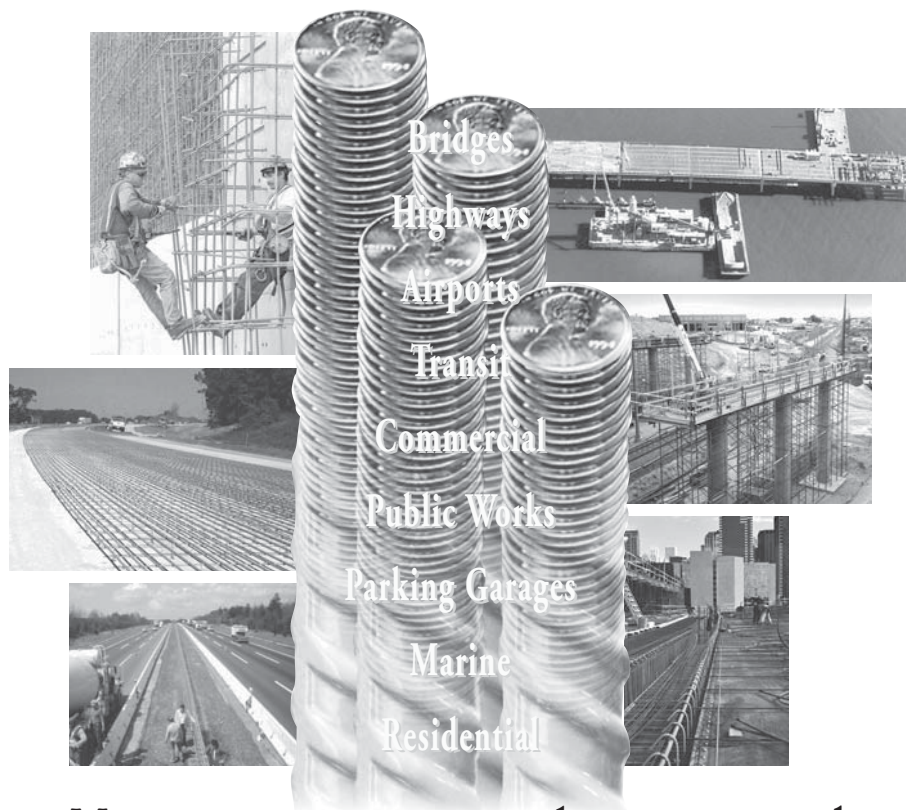
Consistency

Trust in relationships is formed through repeated encounters. If those encounters are positive, the trust grows deeper. Having a lack of follow up or being unresponsive are the two biggest complaints I hear from clients in the A/E industry. It sounds so simple, but it makes me wonder how wildly successful a firm would be if they simply delivered on their promise *every time*. Do you deliver on your promise to return phone calls within four hours? Do you deliver on your promise to meet deadlines? Do you deliver on your promise to attend every meeting? Do you deliver on your promise to tell the client if you are on several teams in a job pursuit?

Interestingly, when interviewing engineers three years ago for a job analysis project, I asked them what made someone good at their particular job. All individuals identified a list of competencies and behaviors that a good engineer would have. Then I asked them what a *great* engineer would look like. All responded that they would have the same list of behaviors, but that all those behaviors would be performed consistently. Thus, consistency not only builds trust, it also demonstrates excellence.

It takes many positive encounters to build a trusting relationship, but only one negative experience to damage it. Sharing your knowledge, being honest, and delivering on your promises are just a few ways to reach trusted advisor status. ■

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