

The *real* way and the *right*
way to get new business

Kim Mason
SALES & MARKETING

Let's get one thing straight. This isn't an "instant fix, double your list and swell your pipeline in a day" kind of guide. Such things are a myth however persuasive the copy. Nor is it a whizzy new marketing gimmick that will have you digging deep for expensive software.

What this is, is a roll your sleeves up, "look at what've got before seeking new clients" kind of guide. A "there are easier ways of getting new business than getting new clients" kind of a guide and a "let's look at the detail, where lots of opportunity lingers, and then put in some leg work" kind of guide.

In other words, before you head off down a shiny new marketing road, let's get to grip with the essentials. Get them right and hey bingo! You'll only need a handful (or less) of new clients (and I'll be sharing some tips for making finding them more effective) and the rest is rock 'n roll as they say.

Get it wrong, or worse still, don't tackle these things at all and you might as well hang up your hat and head home. Or resign yourself to paying out large on new campaigns and getting rubbish results.

And it all starts with your database...

Do you love your database enough to grow your sales?

You might not be sure what you should be doing with your own customer or prospect database – or even whether or not you have one.

Even if you are sure you need a proper database at some stage, you might have no idea where to start, or it feels like a mammoth task you haven't got the energy to tackle right now. After all, things are going OK in the business – aren't they?

And even if you do feel ready to take on the task of building a database, deciding on the route to take can be overwhelming. Buying a list of data might seem completely wrong or alien to you, but you can't quite articulate why.

Perhaps you've inherited a database of business or contact names and don't know where to start? Or perhaps you've spent a long time organically building a database but aren't sure what to do with it now?

Getting your head around data and databases

To get anywhere in developing or building your business, you're going to need data. And by data I mean customer and prospect data. So I think the best starting place is to acknowledge its importance, its seriousness and its value.

If you agree with at least 3 of the points below, there's hope for you. If you get up to 8, you're definitely heading in the right direction. All 13 and I'd like a guest post on my site from you!

1. Believe in the fundamental importance of all your data (customers, prospects, network, suppliers) – all the remaining points are irrelevant if you don't
2. Own it
3. Value it
4. Invest in it
5. Look after it
6. Nurture it
7. Keep it clean
8. Keep it somewhere safe
9. Keep it in the right place
10. Use it carefully
11. Use it regularly
12. Use it with integrity
13. Love it.

I've borrowed a quote which I think sums it all up. It's from the well-known children's author Dr Seuss, taken from his book **The Lorax** – which I loved as a child, and now love reading to my kids as a parent.

Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot,

Nothing is going to get better. It's not.

Dr Seuss, admittedly, was talking about the environment, but I believe the same approach can and should apply to your customer/prospect data in business.

Nine horrible things that happen if you don't love your database

I usually avoid doom and gloom talk in my posts, but I'm going to break that rule to highlight how important I think data is and what happens if you don't take care of it:

1. **Your marketing becomes far less effective.** Because you're talking to the wrong people, or your message isn't even reaching them anymore.
2. **Your marketing will cost you more per customer acquired.** Good data is valuable because it opens the lines of communication between you and your customer. It connects you, and it's far more costly to communicate with people you are not connected with.
3. **The data you do have will reduce in value and usefulness surprisingly quickly unless you keep it clean.** There's a rule of thumb statistic that B2B data will deteriorate at the rate of around 20-30% p.a.
4. **If you ignore it for long enough you will have to start from scratch.** Data doesn't sit around waiting for you to come and get it. People change jobs, move house, grow older, buy different stuff – it all happens pretty quickly these days. (Though to be fair, I'm not aware of the rate of ageing having increased).
5. **Your database depreciates in direct proportion to how badly you look after it.** Or, for the optimistic amongst us, it appreciates in direct proportion to how well you look after it.
6. **You will spend (waste) significant time and money getting it back to good again.**
7. **Your customers will become less loyal surprisingly quickly.** Er, hello, haven't seen you for a while. Meet my new supplier!
8. **Your customers will forget all about you surprisingly quickly.** Er, hello. Remind me what you do again?
9. **People could become cross and share negative feelings about you.** When you have poor quality data, you're likely to be contacting the wrong people about things that are irrelevant to them. And people don't like this. Do you?

Enough negativity. Let's move on to a more positive note and talk about how to get it right.

Getting started with your database

It all starts with your positioning (of course...and don't forget that if you need help with positioning I've written a guide which you can download from my website for free) and knowing very clearly who your target audience is. Because until you're very clear about that, you'll have no idea what data will be valuable to you, and where to start looking for it.

So, let's assume you've worked out exactly who your target audience is, and you're looking for data. Here are a few scenarios to help you on your way.

SME's selling B2B, turning over more than £250k

Let's say you're an SME selling some type of professional services, with a revenue of between £250k and £2m p.a.

Corporates aren't your bag, so you're looking for larger businesses with between 250 and 2,000 employees, ideally with a UK decision-making head office. You have specialist knowledge, experience of and contacts in the engineering and technology sector, so that's where you're focusing your efforts. There's a well-defined buying cycle for your services and you know the typical job titles of the people you need to build a relationship with.

You've also worked out that as you're based in Southern England you're not best positioned to supply to firms in Newcastle, Glasgow and Blackpool. The travel time incurred around briefings and customer meetings makes your rates less than competitive.

In this instance, buying data is a definite and viable option.

But where to get your data?

- **The big agencies** like DNB (Dun & Bradstreet) hold hundreds of millions of company records, sourced from tens of thousands of different places. If you're a company yourself, you might be familiar with your D&B DUNS number. Companies like Experian (of credit checking fame) hold both consumer and company information on a massive scale. Personally, I've always enjoyed using Experian's B2B list builder – partly for the wonderful customer service you get even if you're only buying 100 business records.

- **Other agencies** get the data direct from businesses through different methods, and sell it on to third parties. Check very carefully how they go about this, there are a wide variety of practices out there and not all of them are ethical or even legal.
- **Some are specialists** in particular sectors and build solid data over time or through a membership model, so trading in data may be a secondary purpose for them. Trade associations, regulatory and membership bodies and Chambers of Commerce would come into this category. Becoming a member may give you wider access to their data.
- **And some are service providers in their own right** – for example event organisers – who have found themselves acquiring customer data over time in the form of delegates, exhibitors and visitors and are now realising the value of that data.

Wherever you look, keep a strict eye on data protection rules. For consumer data – go to the Information Commissioner at <https://ico.org.uk>. And for information on UK business data, the Direct Marketing Association is a good place to start – <http://www.dma.org.uk>.

SMEs with a turnover of less than £250k

If you sell B2B, and you're one of the smaller SMEs, then growing your database organically may well be the best approach. This is the DIY model, resource heavy on time, but lower on outgoing cost and can lead to a very clean and reliable database that you know really, really well.

Before the days of LinkedIn, this was rarely a viable option for small business.

Once again, you need to really narrow down your target audience, qualification criteria, buyer job titles and locations – otherwise you're going to be trawling through all of LinkedIn's contacts starting with Aadam Aabbotts.

It's worth paying out for an upgraded LinkedIn account to get better access and search features. Once you get going and really narrow down who and what you're looking for, this can be outsourced to enthusiastic friends, supportive partners and cash-hungry teenagers. That is, as long as they all understand its importance, the level of accuracy and detail required.

Be strict, spot-check what's coming in and aim to add a set amount of contacts per day or week.

Simple ways to start building your own contact database

- **Your own contacts, old colleagues, employees, bosses etc.** If you've been in the industry for a while, you might be surprised just how many relevant people you know (or have known). Check where they are now and get current contact details. Think back over all your jobs, people who hired you and fired you, people whose speeches you heard, workshops you attended, went on training courses with. Google people. Ask mates who are in similar industries for a few names.
- **Exhibitor, delegate and visitor lists** from previous years – in your target market. If they went to X event in 2017, they're probably going to go in 2018. You get the business names, check them against your qualification criteria and if they meet those, search for the relevant employees/contacts on LinkedIn. Ideally at that stage you follow up with a phone call to see if you can grab a direct number, email and/or check a postal address, if needed. So grab a catalogue at your next industry event, and get the highlighter pens out.
- **Membership bodies and trade associations.** It's amazing how many organisations publish the company names of members, though mostly they realise that easily accessible contact names are not appropriate. It can be worth becoming a member (even if only for a year) to get fuller access to their data. If you're locally focused and join the Chamber of Commerce, they may well give you a starter pack of names and addresses. But check relevance before you just add it to your database.

So, there are lots of different (cunning and practical) ways to gather data. But it's all about gathering the right data for the right reasons, about quality over quantity, and about how you look after it over time.

These are your customers, and your prospects. They are the future of your business – so you should look after them.

Which brings us neatly to qualifying your list to improve your sales pipeline

"I've done it!" Yelled a client at me down the phone. "I've started a sales pipeline! I've got 158 leads in my database!"

"What **sort** of leads?" I asked her. Never one to let my clients do a half-baked job.

"Perfect ones," she retorted gleefully.

"You'd be so proud of me," she continued. "They're all headteachers, deputies and SENCOs!" (decision makers, buyers and influencers in her industry). "They're all in Hampshire and all in the larger infant or secondary schools which I already know have a desire to improve in my area. And I've got all their names, emails, addresses and telephone numbers."

She paused.

"Yes, it's taken me six months to get this far, and yes, alright, I know they're only in Excel at the moment, but I can start now. I can market to them." And she hung up.

So now that we've talked about methods of gathering data, we need to look closer at exactly who's on your list and whether they should be.

So why all the excitement about 158 contacts?

158 contact names in a sales database may not seem like much to some businesses.

But to an SME selling new and specialised professional services into schools, this was a major accomplishment and huge step forward. This was the start of her sales pipeline.

These were real, qualified leads.

When three new clients per year is all you need (three good-sized, good-fit clients with a high lifetime value, that is and if you're not convinced about that then you better download my "New business planning - How to!" guide), then putting together a clean database of 158 high quality, qualified leads is exactly where you want to be to start building a solid sales pipeline for the future.

It comes back to understanding who goes where in your sales pipeline

My client and I had already had a few sessions together to get her sales and marketing

thinking started.

We'd looked at the various options she had around growing her business, by asking some of the big questions:

1. What was her mission (did she have one?)
2. Where did she bring the most value?
3. Which services did she most enjoy providing?
4. Which were her most profitable services?
5. What did her best customers use her for and why?
6. What story did her past experience support?

And we'd been able to answer most of these fairly quickly. That gave us – from a sales and marketing perspective – a clear business direction to head in, an abundant but clearly defined target audience and a strong message. Yay!

But we hadn't got any actual *people* to market to. No database. No sales pipeline. Drat.

And now we did. Bingo!

Just what is a qualified lead?

In my own head, when building a B2B sales pipeline, it goes like this:

Dirty data → clean data → qualified lead → prospect → client

Dirty data

Which I appreciate isn't the nicest of terms, until you clean the data up and qualify it, it's just that. These first contacts are not leads, nor prospects and not even people (bit harsh maybe), they are simply data. And dirty data at that.

- That dirty data becomes clean data (real people) – when you know the details you hold on them are definitely correct (company still trading, name, address, email etc.).
- This clean data will morph into a qualified lead only if they pass stage 1 (see below). And if they don't pass stage 1, they get deleted. From your database, that is, not in real life.
- They only become actual prospects if they also have a valid opportunity

within a defined timescale – that is qualification stage 2 (below).

- If there's a good fit between what they need and what you can offer – then they can become clients.

Note: It's worth remembering that whenever you buy a list, you get dirty data. However carefully it's been thought through, filtered and selected before you buy it. Until you know something more about each company or person, it is unqualified (and therefore dirty) data.

Time to get qualified

Your data has moved from dirty to clean and you're raring to go. But just hold on a minute. Marketing to unqualified data is like shouting to a huge crowd in a tornado... when you should really be whispering to a couple of people in a private room.

So there's a bit of work to do yet.

Stage 1 – from clean data to qualified lead

In order to begin to qualify people at stage 1 to allow them into your database of leads and prospects, you need to have first sorted out your niche positioning and have a clearly defined target audience.

If you've got your positioning right, you and your team should now be pretty clear on a bundle of things about your target audience.

Here's a quick check list to recap

- The sector you are targeting (if sector specific)
- The nature of their company and what they do
- The size of their company (set a max and min in terms of turnover, employee numbers or equivalent)
- Where their decision maker/head office is based (if relevant to you)
- The type of job titles that your actual buyers have – and the typical job titles of any influencers, gatekeepers and budget holders

These are criteria against which to benchmark all data.

You also need to have agreed and be able to articulate:

- What your own minimum order value (MOV) is for a single project and/or annual spend
- What your ideal customer provides in the way of minimum lifetime value in an ongoing relationship
- What types of problems your clients have, that you are able to solve
- Why you are (truly) better placed than your competition to solve these problems
- Exactly how you can add value for them – timescales, ballpark costs and ROI

If it fits, it's a qualified lead. Yay! Add them into your sales pipeline. Start communicating with them. If it doesn't, it's just data, and not part of your universe. You can delete them from your CRM, or (depending on your methods) don't add them to your CRM in the first place.

Stage 2 – from qualified lead to prospect

So now you have a qualified lead and need to work out whether they're an active prospect whom you could work with in the short to medium term. What you now need to know includes a lot more detail about them as an organisation and also as people.

In the case of providing B2B professional services, this will involve a reasonable length meeting or two (or at the absolute least a couple of decent phone calls) to find the answers:

- Do they have problems within your area of expertise, which you can solve?
- Are they aware of them, and can they articulate them – clearly, partially, not all?
- Have they got a timescale in mind to solve these matters?
- Do they have a budget already allocated to resource it?
- Are you talking to the decision maker and/or budget holder?

If you get a YES to three or more of these, you're on. Less than three, and you've got a bit more work to do. All five, and (as long as you're a good fit), you've got a really hot prospect – good luck!

Some exceptions that prove the rule

Now and then you'll come across a company or person who you just know is the perfect prospect. Then you match them against your criteria and they don't fit. Even worse, they *definitely* don't fit.

What should you do?

As with any processes, there are exceptions. But the important difference this time is that you are in control of the exceptions.

Rather than wanting to sell your services to any company you come across, you are now making these decisions on who to work with yourself. This moves you to being much more conscious about how you can add value, and gives you more control of the buying relationship.

There are some very good reasons you may decide to define someone as a prospect despite the fact they clearly don't meet your criteria.

Qualifying a prospect on your own terms

1. **The portfolio prospect.** They are such a well-known, on-trend or well-respected brand in your area, that you can use any work you do with them to win other work, grow your reputation or gain speaking opportunities. Even if they are actually tiny and they'll never spend more than 1% of your annual minimum order value (MOV).
2. **The foot in the door.** Their tiny first project value – well below your project MOV – is offset by their potential longer term or lifetime value. In other words, they have a lot of potential. How you judge or value this potential is up to you. Typically this looks like a big client starting a relationship with you by testing you with a small, low risk project.
3. **The stretch client.** Everything is a great fit. Ah, apart from one big thing. They might be in completely the wrong sector – but wanting your best-fit product. Or perhaps they want a service you don't typically provide, but you know them, their industry, competitors, problems etc. inside out. You think carefully before tackling this one – if it fits with your mission and your positioning, then go for it. If not, stay focused and say no.
4. **Wrong job, right company.** Your contact is a very lowly *Supporting Assistant Intern*, or possibly a very senior *Director of Completely Irrelevant Area* – but for

a really interesting, good-fit organisation. And you're struggling to find any other contact or way in to a better contact through all the usual channels (LinkedIn, Google, company websites etc.) Time to stop and think. Is it better to spend precious time looking for a way in to this single possible prospect – or should you spend that time communicating with the people you're already building a relevant relationship with?

5. **Right company, wrong time.** All's good with qualification, you get on like a house on fire, you've learnt lots about them, but do you know what? They simply don't need you at the moment. This often feels a bit sad, but the action here is simply to keep in regular contact and get to know them better. It's companies like these who'll refer you to others – even though they haven't used you, they fully understand what you do and have a relationship with you. And then, when the time comes, you'll be there. It might be 10 years later, but then again – how long would you like to be in business?

Remember that for SMEs it's rarely about quantity. It's about fit, and to find that out you have to do some planning, some digging, lots of learning and lots of listening.

So, you're over the first hurdle. Big cheer but don't start on that new marketing campaign just yet. You may have a wonderful new database but there's still work to do.

Defining new business – it's closer to home than you think

There's a tendency to think that new business means going out and finding new clients. You know the kind of thing I mean. New clients who you've never met before and who have never heard of you before. But guess what?

An existing client is easier to sell to than a new one

And new clients are not only not always easy to find but when you do, the journey from first contact to sale can be a long one.

So, before you set off in pursuit of the rare and mystical creature, the new client, take a few moments to consider some other new opportunities that might be staring you right in the face. And be a whole lot easier to start working with.

1. Another project, existing client

- Often regular or predictable in its timing, this is a piece of work your client needs, and is broadly what you normally do for them.
- Good to have. In fact, vital to have – but let's face it, you've forecasted it ages ago, so it was always yours to lose. Make sure you don't. This project should be treated as if it's as precious as a shiny new client.

2. Different project, existing client

- A bit more exciting, this is a regular client using you for something new, but still one of your core services so no real stretch from a delivery point of view.
- Client account teams high-five each other when this happens. So, make sure your existing clients know about your other services. It's amazing how often I hear, "Oh I had no idea you did that".

3. Eeek! project, existing client

- Admittedly not a well-known professional term, the Eeek! project is one that sales folk love to sell, directors love to tell others about, and client account managers hate to deliver. This often comes out of those "Oh I had no idea you did that" moments from above.
- Well out of your comfort zone, but potentially within your capability. Potentially. A bottle or two of Prosecco may be cracked open for bringing this one in – but may I suggest you wait 'till after project delivery?

4. Any project, dormant client

- Satisfying in the same way it's satisfying to hear an ex-girl or boyfriend say they wish they hadn't dumped you. And would it please be possible for you to go out with each other again?
- The important thing here is, be gracious. Be pleased to see them, don't talk about where they've been since you last saw them (unless they bring it up, it could upset you), and do a wonderful job.
- They'll never leave again and if all goes well with the next bit of work, will become one of your strongest advocates.
- **Better still, politely contact those dormant clients if you haven't in a while.** Find out why they are silent and if you can help. Or leave them with the client

team to re-establish the connection – but see below for a note of caution.

The moral is...there's a lot to be said for existing clients

The first three situations above were actually just **client development**. These are existing clients, even though the work you do with them may be new. But they definitely shouldn't be ignored in the search for new business and should form an important part of your strategy.

Dormant (snoozing, sleeping or hibernating) clients

Dormant clients are different – and can be treated as either existing clients or as truly new business, to suit your own resources. A word on this though.

It can be too easy to assign the dormant ones to client services or client account managers to develop. But it's worth having a think about what has *changed* client-side to bring about that dormancy, and then make a decision based on those facts:

- **Key client contacts moved on to new jobs and no real relationships in place**

Can be best to treat this as a completely new prospect and allow the sales team to nurture them, with the past relationship as a good conversation starter.

- **Oops, we forgot about them and they've gone a bit quiet – but we've only just noticed**

Leave them with the client team to re-establish the connection – but give them a sensible timescale to get it done by. Then if there's still no movement, hand over to sales for re-qualifying or restarting.

- **Client gone very quiet for unknown reasons**

If there's no clear reasons after a bit of proper digging (illness, company struggles, change of leadership etc.) this can sometimes point to bigger problems in your own client service levels.

On that basis, it's important that a senior member of your team gets in touch to find out more, or you even consider getting an independent customer research professional involved. As long as the client is happy to take part, you've then got the chance to find out what went wrong. And learn from it.

Developing your existing clients – two simple plans

1. Be client curious

Ok. So, you've got some of your existing clients (dormant or otherwise) in your sights. Time to talk about client development, and to share a surprisingly effective and simple tip on how to improve it.

Client development should be ongoing, continual and as natural a part of doing business as it is providing your actual service. Because then, if the going gets tough and the investment into acquiring brand new business needs to be put on hold for a while, your existing clients don't get a shock as you suddenly turn to them and become a whole lot more interested.

So, to my tip: be client curious

It is simple, effective and a genuinely pleasurable experience for the customer. By 'be client curious' I mean show curiosity and be inquisitive. Then be proactive. Show them you want to know more about them and their business, industry and people: their challenges, highs and lows, successes and failures.

Keep an eye on their competitors, watch what they do. Share this information freely and frequently. Make suggestions based on your knowledge and experience. Give away relevant advice and recommendations that show you understand their problems.

Remember back to any 'A' levels you did (for those in the UK) – where the teachers went on about how reading around the subject would be the difference between a C grade, and an A grade.

Taking your client's brief and just delivering it is the business equivalent of being spoon fed the knowledge you need to just pass your exam. Well done, you passed – another day gone, another client reasonably satisfied, another salary cheque received.

There is far more to building a successful client portfolio than just good service

For those of you with an interest in the business, with commercial leanings, with client revenue targets, with ambition... there is client development. Get interested in the client, genuinely, and start asking questions.

Read about their industry, sign up to alerts and pass on timely snippets of relevant news. You will learn more about them, be better placed to offer higher value advice,

hear about related business challenges and projects well before they become pitches or tenders... the list of benefits is endless:

- They'll be flattered and pleased by your interest, share their own developments and concerns with you, and ultimately start asking more about you.
- You'll naturally talk about other products and services you offer – and the cross-sell can happen.
- Your relationship will deepen and greater trust will develop.
- Greater trust means more work and more referrals.

And all that simply from being curious about clients, inquisitive, and proactive. What's not to like?

Let's look at possible obstacles in that process

You don't have time to read around the subject / think of questions to ask / search out snippets of news from the myriad of info available for every client. You aren't a naturally outgoing or inquisitive person, you're a specialist and have a serious service to deliver in a tight timescale. Shouldn't the sales guy/girl be doing all that stuff, isn't that what they are paid to do?

Not enough time for client development?

Everyone is busy, but the successful ones – and the successful businesses – are focused on client service **and** client development. There are ways to streamline the process, and what works for your business will depend on your size, services and set-up.

Streamlining your client development

- **Profile and group your clients** - for example into separate industry sectors – and assign a person to become the resident 'expert' in that area. They are the knowledge gatherer and they take responsibility for feeding client news, industry news and other useful tidbits out to the person/people managing the clients in that sector.
- **Set up Google alerts (free)** - or invest in an industry insight tool like Meltwater (not free) – there are lots available at various price points.

- **Brainstorm all clients** - with the team and together create a list of 20 things you would like to know about your client / sector etc. that you don't know already. The ~~noisiest~~ most naturally inquisitive member of your team may find this so easy that they could write your list for you without hardly knowing your clients.

They should be open questions (no yes or no answers). Make this your starting point and set yourself the challenge of asking one question at every meeting or during every phone call. Top tip – don't ask these questions by email – it just feels like homework for a client and they would rather ignore the whole email than try and respond in writing. You want to start a conversation, not query the client's knowledge!

- **It can't be the sales team doing this** – they need to stay focused on winning brand new business, clients you've never worked with before. It also can't be the sales team because it has to come from the person the client already has a working relationship with, so that respect and trust can develop and grow.

Worried that you can't give out free advice and recommendations, or you'll sabotage your own consultancy income?

Don't be. This is about demonstrating thought leadership and building trust. When you offer relevant and useful advice to a client in response to a problem they have, it moves the conversation up a level. It helps to position you away from being a supplier (potentially of a commodity, where your client could change suppliers any time) and towards being a partner (someone they lean on who really understands them).

People do business with people, and in the longer term they remember and rely on those that help and support them. Be confident that the paid consultancy or strategy work will follow as the relationship builds.

Can't get yourself (or your team) to be interested in the client's business?

If you are struggling with being genuinely interested in a client's business or sector, I see three options.

1. You become interested. Someone once told me that 'anything in detail is interesting', when I asked them how they could contemplate doing a three year doctorate on the intricacies of complex, synthetic hydrocarbons as lubricants in subsea marine engines – or something like that. I've reminded

myself of this idiom plenty of times when I know I need to pay more real attention to a prospect or a client, and it works. The more I learn, the more interested I get and the more I want to know. It's a virtuous cycle.

2. You are in the right job but the wrong industry.
3. You may have the wrong attitude to be good at client development. You might be better suited to a role as a specialist in a bigger team supported by an account manager or client director who has that responsibility. This is a common set-up in many larger professional service organisations.

Finally

This approach of 'be client curious' works equally well in prospecting and sales during the qualification stage as it does in client development.

(*Note on plagiarism* – I coined the phrase 'be client curious' as I began writing this article as it seemed to perfectly sum up the approach I think you need to succeed in client development. I have unashamedly borrowed it from the phrase 'Be Life Curious', used by Psychologies Magazine – so thanks to them for that starting point!)

2. And plan 2 - use a little customer research to seriously boost your sales

So, you've conquered client curiosity but does your customer understand you? Everyone goes on these days about how important it is to understand your customer. And being told that can sometimes feel both glaringly obvious and a bit patronising.

After all, how could you be failing to understand your customer, and still be doing good business? Worryingly, it's quite easy to do exactly that. Because the answer partly lies in how well *they* understand *you*.

<http://allthingsnewbiz.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Dan-beach-looking.jpg>

The good news is, that with a bit of extra effort put in to understanding them more deeply – and in helping them to understand you – you can do even better in your business and win more work. Here's how to go about it.

8 questions to check how well you understand each other

1. How many of the services you actually offer will your customer be able to list?

2. Can they articulate why they chose you when they were *first* looking for a supplier?
3. Why do they use you *now*?
4. Do you know which of your competitors they've used in the past and/or also use alongside you?
5. What do they think you do really well?
6. What would they not use you for, and why *not*? (That you do actually do...)
7. How do they rate your customer service?
8. How do they respond to your competitors when they get contacted by them?

How the answers will improve your business development

I'll run through the questions one by one to demonstrate how the answers can give you the insight and understanding to start improving your sales, marketing and customer service.

1 If your customer lists less than 50% of your services, they don't know that much about what you do

You could be missing out on opportunities for cross-selling other services or products, just because your client doesn't really know what you're capable of. Your relationship will grow stronger – and their spend will get bigger – with a little more TLC and closer communication. A little more strategic client development will make all the difference here.

2 Knowing (and being able to articulate) why they chose you is about both you AND your customer being clear on how you're different from the competition

It's about being clear on your positioning, and your niche. It's about knowing exactly which type of customer you are most likely to suit, and using that knowledge to actively market to and acquire more of those particular ones.

3 Do they use you *now* because you have a good relationship, or because they can't be bothered to switch supplier?

Is it because you understand them better than your competitors do – and if so, how much does your customer recognise and value that understanding? You can take

actions to strengthen your relationship *even more* to prevent competitors getting a look in with a cheeky starting promotion or discount. And you can improve your understanding of how your customer works and what they like, in order to offer even greater value.

4 Your competitors are out there – and they want the work that you've got

If your customer relationship is strong, then you may be aware that they currently use your competitors for certain things (which you can also do), and you'll hopefully understand why.

That's good, because it means you can work on changing the situation. If you don't know who else they work with (and why), make it your goal to find out.

5 What your customers think you do best should fit with the reasons that they use you now

They will be prepared to give you testimonials and to recommend you to colleagues and other contacts around this area, because they will have definite confidence in you and the value you bring to them.

What they think you do best is something you can use to help define your positioning or niche, and to look at becoming a thought-leader in. Doing more of what you do best (as long as it's profitable) can create a virtuous circle of success.

6 This is a critical one, and one you absolutely need to know

By knowing what a customer would NOT use you for – although you see yourselves as capable of it – you will learn a lot.

Understanding why they wouldn't use you is the key. It might be your existing customer service, or your knowledge and understanding, or it might be because of a particular employee. Whatever the reason, these answers are the red flags pointing out where you could improve, or maybe even showing you which products and services you perhaps shouldn't be offering (as they are now).

7 Customer service is something that is entirely within your control

Because of that, you should always be asking how you can do it better. Your own perception of how good it is may be very different from your customer's perception. Asking them is the only real way of finding out.

Firms sometimes use independent people to conduct this type of research in order to get more open and honest answers – especially where negative or critical feedback can actually be the most constructive to receive. Knowing you're doing things fine is rarely a cause for action!

8 Not many people ever ask their customers how they respond to competitors who make contact

For that very reason, it's a wonderful question, and one worth asking. Of course, they may say they're never contacted by your competitors (really, are they sure?), or they may well ignore them completely if they do make contact (excellent). On the other hand, they may have recently invited them in for an initial conversation or meeting (eeeeek!).

If your relationship is strong enough for them to have told you this, the only real conversation you can have is something along these lines...

"My worry is that you invited them in because you feel there are weaknesses in some of what we are doing for you. If you can share your concerns with me, I can try to make sure we improve in those areas. On the other hand, if you're talking to them about things that we don't offer – it would make me feel good to know that, and I can tell my people that they're still doing great work and it's not personal."

A good customer will understand this in the way that it's meant. That is, if you have a good relationship.

Get started with your own customer research

So, now start writing your own questions for your customer research, ones that are more specific to your own customers than mine are. Keep it short and sweet, get a friend or very tame customer to run through your draft questionnaire with ideas and input on the actual questions and the length of the survey.

Even my 8 questions would take a conscientious customer a good 20 mins to answer, so remember to explain to customers that you're doing it to make things better for them.

Now send it out

You can do it online with Survey Monkey, or a similar tool, if you've got a lot of clients, or you can create a good old hard copy and stick it in the post. Or send an email with an

attachment.

Remember to offer a little something, drawn at random from those who take part, as an incentive to complete the survey – a bottle of bubbly / hamper from Deliamo (these are brilliant by the way) / 3 hours free X / 20% off something useful on their next order...

And make sure you DO something with the responses

As with any survey, the most important thing is to then to DO something with the answers that you get back:

- Make sure you send out the prize as promised
- Collate the responses and look for common threads
- Make improvements where you get the red flags
- Tell your customers about the improvements you are making
- Review your client development / customer service plans
- Power up your business development with the insight you get:
 - Look at what you do best and clarify your positioning
 - Identify the customers who are happiest (and most profitable) and target more of them
 - Adjust your sales and marketing tactics to reflect what you've learnt

This simple act of asking your customers a few questions will give your client and business development plans a serious boost – but only if you follow up with actions!

OK so what about truly new, new business

So you've harvested (or got a plan for harvesting) all the potential work you can possibly glean from existing or dormant clients. So where does that leave you now?

Well you shouldn't rest on your laurels. But you don't need to panic either. Because if you've read my "New business planning - How to!" guide, you should already know that all you need is three new clients a year (and if you haven't read it, you might want to do that now - it's free after all!). Yup, honestly, just three. But there is a but. In fact, there's more than one but.

These three new businesses are the businesses that you've never worked with to date. Not two years ago, not five years ago, and not even when your business had a different name and your dad/auntie/grandpa ran it. That's the first but.

And they've got to be three good-sized, super good-fit clients with a high lifetime value. That's the second but. (More help with that on my website.)

On top of which you're going to need a little bit of a mental re-shuffle (and probably a bit of reorganisation too) in order to bring these new clients home. It's the third but, so let's tackle it head on.

Separate client development from new business to win more work

Maybe you're an account director, targeted with a new business revenue and wondering how you can possibly achieve that at the same time as servicing the accounts you've got.

Or perhaps you're the business owner of a professional services company wondering why your account managers or client service directors rarely seem to bring in any new clients themselves.

Both of you want to know why it doesn't seem to work. And, more importantly, what you can do about it.

Account directors/managers keep the business going

In a professional services business, account directors have a vital job to do. They look after the clients. They make sure clients get what they are paying for, on time and on budget. They keep them happy. Without this in place, you will lose the clients you do have, and there will be no more business.

New business needs a different mindset

The very simple reason that account directors don't (usually) win new clients by themselves is that you need two very different mindsets to do these two very different jobs.

Inside the mind of a good account director...

1. Our existing clients are everything to our business. Without them, we are nothing.
2. Must write those 11 CDPs (client development plans) for our bigger clients to

make sure I keep on top of those forecasted revenue targets from existing clients.

3. Three clients want a face-to-face catch up next week – that's a lot of travel.
4. This client has hit a really big problem and needs us quickly, so I'll have to put the new biz stuff on hold.
5. I mustn't forget to reply to those client emails – they've been flagged in my inbox for 2 days already.
6. I said I'd send those costs over by end of play today – I must get it done now (5.27pm). Oh, drat. Better chase the subcontractors first and apologise to the client, sort that tomorrow.
7. So, you gave me the wrong brief and want an entirely new set of costs for tomorrow? No problem, my pleasure!
8. Specify and install a CRM for keeping in touch with clients on new services, company successes, upselling and stuff? Isn't that something the new biz team would be doing? Oh yes, that's us! Righty ho...

When you have one person doing both jobs – and it often happens, especially in smaller businesses – what usually happens is that neither job is done brilliantly, and client service levels are compromised to try and squeeze in some new business activity.

Is it any surprise it's challenging to focus on bringing in new clients, when the ones you have need such a lot of looking after?

Inside the mind of a good new business director...

1. Our clients are everything to our business. Without any new ones, we will become nothing.
2. A client called with a big urgent new project today. Our account director will be busy looking after them. (Thank heavens I'm not involved.) I'll crack on and create a proper marketing/new biz plan.
3. Our pipeline is looking thinner than it should: I must give lead generation a boost / get on the phone.
4. I need to analyse all of last year's prospect meetings, wins and losses to find out what worked... and what didn't.

5. We're behind on follow up – and as we're averaging 9 contacts before conversion, that's a lot of keeping in touch to do.
6. Great – 4 new prospect meetings in the next week or two, and all a good fit, well qualified. That's a lot of travel, then a lot of work to progress those, cost them up, look at solutions etc. Better make sure I'm free to focus on those.
7. I need to look at new channels to market, or perhaps a strategic alliance. Some careful planning to be done when I have a mo.
8. Social media? What, me? Oh, and a new website? Ah, isn't that something the marketing team would be doing? Oh yes, that's us! Righty ho...

A good new business director will care only about the clients they are going to acquire in the future. And how to get the organisation in front of those clients.

Separate new business from looking after clients

The answer lies in separating out your new business work from your existing client work so that employees can work in one mindset or the other – but not both. How you do this depends very much on your size, and here are some tips and suggestions to get you thinking about what's right for you:

- Unless you're perfectly positioned and already very well known in your area of expertise, new business needs experienced planning and strategic thinking before any tactics are implemented.
- New business (strategy and implementation) often suits a part-time role, but existing client support rarely does.
- Both new business strategy and ongoing marketing activity can be quite easily outsourced, client work cannot.
- Once the strategy is ready, a lower-level new business/marketing executive role can be combined with an office admin role.
- It is worth carefully selecting and investing in the right CRM (customer relationship management) system to make it easier to manage both your prospect and client databases.
- Think about automating as much of your marketing process as possible – either through your website with tools such as MailChimp or AWeber, or other

bespoke marketing automation software.

#And if you can separate out your processes for acquiring these different forms of new business, then you are well on your way to winning more work

A last word on new clients.

There are two types:

Foot in the door project, brand new client

- **My personal favourite.** This demonstrates a lot of good sense in both client and supplier. Your team has built up a good enough relationship that the client now trusts you enough to begin work. And importantly, you've sold in something you are easily able to deliver well.
- The client has also been commercially savvy enough to know that all the best relationships develop over time. So they've kicked off working with you, with a test project. A small piece of work, that is yours to do brilliantly. Or not.
- If the client is a great fit with your positioning – get the bonus cheque-book or employee reward notes out. This client should be the right size, sector, nature, in the right location and with pretty good potential. Yay!
- Don't panic if it's only a small project. It might not save the budget but it should lead to bigger and better things.

Huge great project, brand new client

- On first appearances, you might think this would go hand-in-hand with shouts of joy, backslapping, a day out for everyone involved in winning the work – and bonuses all round. It's the holy grail.
- But, but, but – such wonders commonly come with an enormous cost of sale followed by a lengthy headache. This is typically the result of a 256 page tender with an equally lengthy process attached to it..it may be the ultimate vision but it's certainly not the easiest or quickest route to success.

So whatever they tell you, those marketing gurus, winning new business is not all about winning new clients. And even if it is, it's not all about glow in the dark, marketing platforms that will suck out the life blood of your marketing team.

Getting new business is about having great data and exploring opportunities that might

be right under your nose.

Now go forth, get to work and explore those exciting new business opportunities!

Kim Mason

07827 297569

kim.mason@allthingsnewbiz.co.uk

allthingsnewbiz.co.uk

I help determined SMEs acquire the right new clients