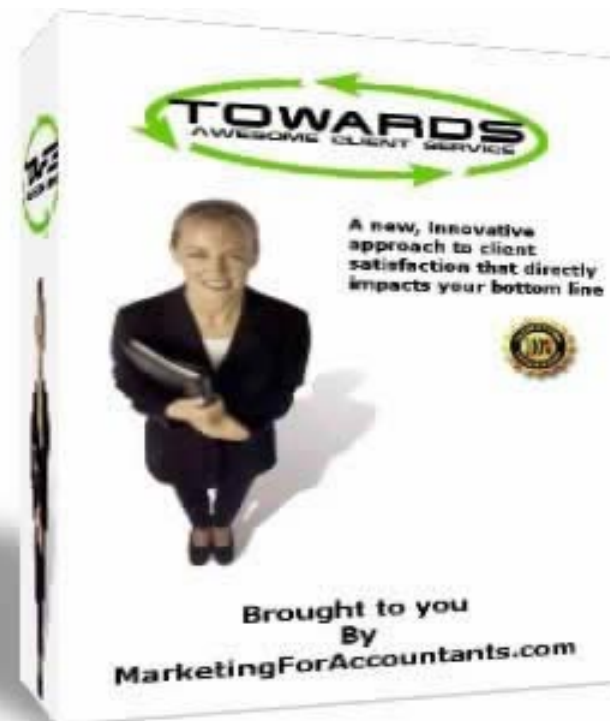


Visit us on-line at www.awesomeclientservice.com



Module One

Welcome to TACS Module 1.



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Module One



Thank you for investing in TACS

Right now, you probably have no idea at all, just how important the decision you recently made to invest in yourself with TACS will prove to be.

I am sure that you will have certain expectations, based on the information you received that helped you to come to the decision to buy the system.

This I promise you at the outset: Whatever your expectations originally were, you will surpass them by a substantial amount if you do just three things:

- 1. Read the whole module** each time you receive a new one, from start to finish **at least twice** before you do anything else the TACS modules recommend.
- 2. Respond to your e-coach whenever he contacts you.** Your TACS e-coach is here to help you succeed with the system, and our predetermined series of e-coaching sessions are intended to keep you on track with your implementation of TACS so that you are ready for the next module at the end of each three-month period.
- 3. Follow the ideas and implement them,** they really do work.

If you really want to see your practice grow, win new clients, keep your existing ones, sell higher value services that your clients truly value and appreciate, then this is the system for you.

It is the cumulative result of 22 years in the accounting profession, observing what works and what does not, and refining every idea, every document and every tool available and testing them on real, live clients, to deliver one comprehensive awesome client service system.

I wish you every success. If at any time you have a question, please feel free to contact me directly at steve@marketingforaccountants.com.

Sincerely

Steve McIntyre-Smith, BA (Hons), MA, Ph.D, M IDM.
TACS Author & Publisher, President, MFA Group.

“Welcome. If you really want to see your practice grow, win new clients, keep your existing ones, sell higher value services that your clients truly value and appreciate, then this is the system for you.”



Module One

How to use this system.

TACS is delivered in a modular format with three months between each module for a very good reason.

There is a lot to take in, and you are running your accounting firm full time.

Each module is packed with new ideas, so you will have to read the entire module more than once before deciding where to start.

The system can be followed verbatim, start at page one, read a section, implement it and move on to the next section or the next idea and repeat this cycle until you have worked your way to the end of the module. By the time you have done this, the next module will be on its way to you and you can move on to that upon its arrival.

Alternatively, you can read the whole module a couple of times, and decide which activities are going to have the biggest impact on your firms results, and start there.

The choice is yours. Each module is a guideline to success which, when coupled with your own TACS e-coach, will lead you to become a totally client focused accounting firm.

These are skills and methods that you learn for life. They will stay with you as 'best practices' wherever your career takes you. Over the years, they will help you to achieve results far beyond your original expectations.

Zig Ziglar, the great public speaking coach and motivational speaker says that 'the power to do comes from doing'.

So on that note, let's get started.

Towards Awesome Client Service

Module One – Index

TOPIC



PAGE

Introduction	5
Client Preference Criteria	9
How Can We Provide Awesome Client Service?	11
An Interaction With A Client Is Rarely Neutral	13
The Client Relationship Time Line	17
Once A Client, Always A Client	18
The Client Welcome Pack	19
Project Planning Report	22
Project Review Form	24
The Client Attraction and Retention Pyramid	25
TACS Principle #1	28
TACS Principle #2	32
Where To Start	33
What Makes A Client Change Adviser?	34
Why Being Good Isn't Good Enough	38
Turning Your CPE/CPD Into A Client Service Benefit	39
Why Client Service Is A Contact Sport	43
What Do Clients REALLY Want From You?	45
Challenging the Status Quo	46
Going The Extra Mile (In Ten Minutes Flat)	48
TACS Principle #3	50
Jump The Hurdles To Win New Business	53
Self-Assessment - What Do I Need To Change?	66
Client Feedback, Pre-TACS	68
A Letter To Clients Introducing TACS	71
Self-Assessment - Why Do I Need To Change?	72
Client Focus Tool	73
Self-Assessment - What's In It For Me?	77
Generating More Referrals From Your Clients	79
Introducing TACS To Your Staff	99
First Impressions	104
TACS Contact Management Form 1 – Client Classification	114
TACS Contact Management Form 2 & Conversation Guidelines	115
'A' Class Client Contact Form	116
'B' Class Client Contact Form	117
'C' Class Client Contact Form	118
Client Focus Tool Score Card	119
Interpreting The Results	120
The TACS Continuum	122

TACS Module 1

We live in an exciting time, in the accounting profession. It's also a changing time and a competitive time. Today, the client has never been so educated about their needs and how you, as a professional can help them.

They receive a constant flow of marketing messages from a wide range of competing firms, all hustling for an opportunity to get in front of them in order to pitch their services.

Since the opening up of advertising and other marketing methods to practitioners in the 1980s, the accounting profession has developed a number of favourite routes to attract new clients.

From the sole practitioner sending out a regular flow of newsletters and other useful types of information, to the 'Big 4' using highly complex and very expensive data manipulation, prospect profiling and market segmentation software, the marketing environment for the public accounting firm has evolved into a profession of its own.

Yet, for most of us, generating new business is still mostly about relationships.

The relationships we develop with other professionals who are in a position to make referrals to us can make a huge impact on our gross annual billings.

The relationships we develop with our existing clients who, likewise, are a rich source of potential new business, both from providing additional services to them directly and from any referrals they may make to us can also make a big difference to our lifestyle.

Finally, the relationships we foster with our staff can also have a very profound impact on our gross fee income and thus our firm's profitability, by turning each and every team member into a 'marketing team member' for our firm.

So much emphasis is placed on winning new clients that it is easy to overlook the clients we already have. We all like to think that we provide an excellent service to our clients, and we probably do, but the secret to real success is to let your clients see and understand just what a good job you are doing for them.

A client who knows that you always 'go the extra mile' will always be happy to reward you. The rewards that are possible come in many guises:

- **Client Loyalty** – it would take a really stupid and costly mistake on your part to lose the client.
- **Higher Fees** – super-satisfied clients are not so fee sensitive. If you provide VALUE for the higher fees then they believe you are worth it.
- **Tighter Bonding** – The more work you do for a client (in terms of the more services you provide to them) the harder it is for them to decide to leave you.

Frequent, Quality Referrals – A truly delighted client often goes out of their way to introduce you to other, good quality potential clients.

So, while many of us (myself included) get a real 'buzz' from the thrill of the chase when hunting for new clients, we must never overlook the importance of farming our existing crop of clients to ensure that we retain their business in the face of stiff competition, and to look for opportunities to provide them with additional services.

In my 22 years in the accounting profession I have learned, often by trial and error, the very best way to do this.

It is simply to provide each and every client with a delightful service experience, where they have received far more than they expected and found the staff and partners that they worked with to be outstanding individuals who had the client's needs and the client's success as their number one priority and did whatever it took to ensure that the client's expectations were not just met, but far exceeded.

Over the last two years I have documented every type of tool that I have used to fine-tune this process, and I pass the results onto you, as 'Towards Awesome Client Service'.

To enhance the dependency of the client upon you and your firm, awesome client service is exactly what we need to provide.

How many minutes would it take, in a meeting among you and your partners, to fill a dozen pages of a flip chart with concrete benefits that would accrue to your firm if you were known for providing awesome client service?

What do you think the results of providing awesome client service should be?

- Would you get more or fewer referrals from existing clients?
- Would clients be more or less likely to pay your bills on time?
- Would clients be more likely or less likely to complain about the amount of your fees, the quality of your service and the time frames involved?
- Would clients be more likely or less likely to truly appreciate you?
- Would you be more likely or less likely to keep clients for longer?
- Would your clients be more or less susceptible to approaches from your competitors?

Well, then ... if the benefits are so obvious, why is awesome client service among accounting firms so rare?

I believe that it is because the accounting profession is fraught with barriers and obstacles that discourage us from providing what we all know would be beneficial.

It's in-bred from our first day as a trainee in the office. We're told: "Here is your time sheet, each day MUST add up to at LEAST 8 chargeable hours a day".

Ask your clients how many times they've been approached by your competitors, and pursued aggressively. And then ask yourself if you can continue to be complacent about keeping your clients happy, on a day-by-day basis.

Even though there are notable exceptions to each of the challenges described below, most of us fall prey to a good number of them, it seems that we just can't help ourselves.

Almost everything about the practice of an accounting firm prevents awesome client service:

- Accountants are trained to be accountants — not client relation experts. Sorry, but that means too many of us behave like geeks and not enough like caring professional service providers.
- The billable hour is so sacred that non-billable activities are denigrated. We often starve the client relationship in favour of getting another hour billed.
- Accountants believe that clients are focused only on solutions. We therefore get to the challenge at hand without worrying about optics.
- Clients are really focused on effort. We conceal most of ours.
- Most Accountants bill in unimaginative ways (hourly-based). We frequently either under-bill or over-bill when compared to the VALUE the client has received for the service provided.
- Clients will happily pay fees commensurate with the value of services offered. That would allow us to "afford" some client relations time.
- Clients are expected to interrupt their day in order to visit our offices, at a time convenient to us. This is nonsense. We are service providers and we must always remember that we if don't look after the client, someone else will.
- Work in progress is usually valued by reference to the number of hours worked to date on incomplete assignments, multiplied by each person's charge-out rate. Again, this is a total red herring, if you bill clients according to the value of the work completed. We will need to reassess, for our own internal use, how we evaluate work in progress once up and running with the TACS program.
- We are starved of client contact from our first days in the office, only when we attain our designation are we suddenly expected to be able to develop existing clients and acquire new ones.

Once familiar with the contents of the first module, you will have a far better appreciation of how this could radically effect how you run your practice.

New ideas will hit you at any time, so we encourage TACS subscribers to carry a pen and notepad or a pocket tape recorder with them at all times and to record these ideas immediately they come to you so as not to lose them later.

The reality is that we cannot suddenly provide awesome client service to all clients. It's just not possible – unless you have very few clients – so some difficult choices await you at this point.

It's A Matter Of Choice

How do you choose to whom you should provide awesome client service?

My mother always told me, "Put your family first." Good, sound matrimonial advice. If you want your marriage to last, you invest in your spouse and make him or her your main focus.

But when it comes to clients, most of us are bigamists. We simply don't stop at one! Unless you believe you put all your clients first, then I'm going to take a risk and advocate discrimination. (Don't worry; this sort of discrimination will not offend.)

Some of you may assert: "Nonsense! We must put *all* clients first."

I do not yet understand all the principles of quantum mechanics, and therefore the multiple universe theory may support the notion that *all* clients *can* be first.

For those who can execute this notion to perfection, my unqualified admiration, for the rest of us, we may need to narrow our focus by learning to prioritize.

We have to decide whom to *really* put first. This may be partially a dynamic exercise similar to a hospital emergency room — the patient seen first is not a function of comparing that patient to all patients, but to the other patients in the emergency room at that moment.

Most firms don't have emergency wards (unless you're an insolvency practitioner). In the practice of tax and accounting, our patients tend to be manifested by a creature called "The File."



Electronic or paper, this creature has amazing powers.

The right file can cause physiological changes to us just by looking at it — tighten our stomach muscles, raise our heart and respiratory rates — just by catching our eye as we sweep a look over our domain.

The file most resembles the emergency room patient when the client represented by the file deigns to phone or e-mail, fax or, write. When this occurs, one might be required to do an on-the-spot assessment like our doctor friends.

However, between such “emergencies,” we might consider prioritizing our clients this way.

Feel free to shuffle the list — it’s your judgment call, not mine — but I hope the criteria might be helpful:

Client Preference Criteria

- Clients who have the capacity to give us future work, either directly or by referral.
- Clients over a certain fee level.
- Clients who will enhance our reputation simply by being associated with them.
- Clients who have the kind of work that forces us to continuously learn.
- Clients who are in industries we enjoy serving, and know something about. Call it a “niche market”. (More about serving niche markets later.)
- Clients who can afford to pay for the value we give them.
- Clients we like.

We might exclude those who do not meet these criteria, including clients who feel it necessary to test the limits of ethics and propriety on every file, or clients who habitually moan and complain about the level of fees charged or the timescales involved in completing their assignment.

We will cover in detail how these clients can either be converted to our preferred list or not as the case may be during our journey together.

The clients who do not make it to your awesome client service list should be treated well (like a cousin) but they may not deserve of you the time and effort that it takes to really make them “first” (like your spouse).

Use the TACS Contact Management Form 1 in the appendix to classify your clients to help to determine which ones you are going to concentrate on first.

Notes

How Can We Provide Awesome Client Service?

When you've narrowed the field to those whom you are going to "spoil" you need to commit to spending *some* non-billable time on doing just that.

Here is the starter list of five ideas that you can implement today to get started:

1. **Visit their place of business** (even if an airplane is required).
2. **Ensure your team knows the names of the client's key individuals.**
3. **Initiate a rapid response procedure:**
 - Respond within half a business day, maximum.
 - Give the client pager/cell/emergency contact options.
 - Send regular status reports on progress of the client's matter.
4. **Learn about the industry of the client.**
 - Subscribe to the client's preferred business publications *and read them*.
 - Attend the client's preferred industry seminar (just one annually).
 - Have the client in to teach you about his/her business.
5. **Talk fees and fee arrangements and satisfaction guarantees.**

Don't think too much and act too little! If this introduction has suggested a few ideas worth considering, it remains worthless unless and until you "execute" one of the ideas (just one) that appeals to you personally.

Once you have implemented the first idea, move on to work on the second, and so on.

This program will look at all of these, and many more, over the course of the 4 modules, and we will help you prioritize each one along the way.

Don't close the page on this introduction until you've thought of at least one thing you're going to *do* as a result of reading this.

When you have done that, you have joined the ranks of winners. Like Tiger Woods and Estée Lauder, they are not famous for what they have *thought*. They are famous for what they have *done*.

On the next page, make some notes about some of the things you are going to do, right now as a result of starting on the TACS program.

Notes

An Interaction With A Client Is Rarely Neutral

Before we set out on this year-long journey together, we need to take stock and evaluate where your firm is right now, in terms of performance using the following measurable criteria:

- Client satisfaction
- Where your existing clients come from
- Who refers work to you, how often, and why
- The \$ value of new business you generate annually right now.

We do this so that at the end of your implementation of TACS, you can determine where any changes have taken place and what the benefit of the TACS system has been for you expressed in hard cash.

We do this using a measure I call Fee Income Triggers, or FITs, and your clients' Present Rating Of Fee Income Triggers (or Pre-TACS Profit).

**Present
Rating
Of
Fee
Income
Triggers**

So, what is a fee income trigger?

It's a "moment of truth".

A moment of truth is: "Any interaction that takes place between a client and your firm, which will influence the client's opinion of the quality of your work, their likelihood of using you again and whether they are likely to recommend you to others."

In other words, any time a client telephones your office. Do they get to speak with whom they wanted? If not, are messages returned promptly? (Promptly as defined by the CLIENT, NOT you!) Is their matter resolved to their satisfaction and beyond?

When they arrive on time for a meeting, are they kept waiting? Are they offered refreshments? Is the waiting area comfortable? Is there a good selection of reading materials?

Do you keep clients waiting for more than 5 minutes? If you do, you are losing business and may not even know it.

More about keeping clients waiting later. Back to your Present Rating Of Fee Income Triggers.

Interactions with clients are rarely neutral in the impression they give.

They generally give a favourable or an unfavourable impression to the client, and how they perceive that transaction to have been handled is the reality to them. No other perception matters.

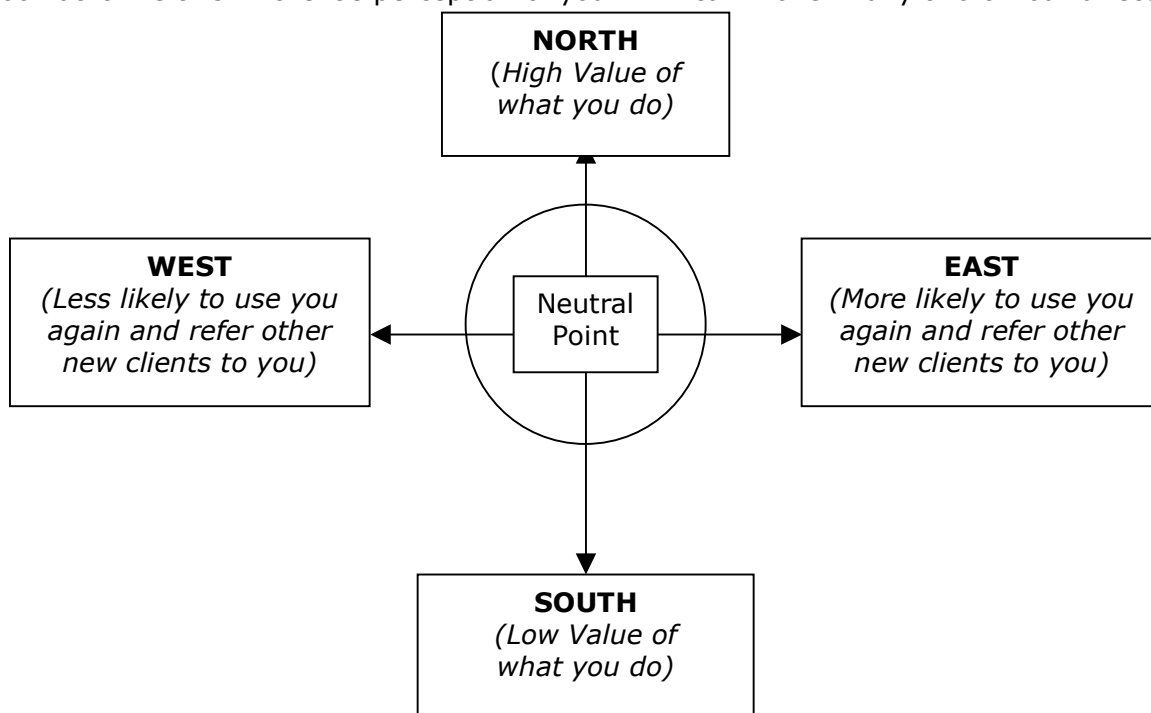
“Sorry, We’re Very Busy Right Now” Just Doesn’t Cut It

How an interaction with a client is handled will influence their future buying decision and also their inclination to make referrals to you and your firm.

So, we should always aim to super-satisfy client expectations and always deliver more than they expect. Offering true value on a timely basis goes a very, very long way.

A Sense Of Direction. It’s like a compass.

Let’s look at it like this. A client’s perception of your firm can move in any two of four directions.



In every case, we want our clients to be headed in a Northeasterly direction. Valuing what we do for them as a higher value service after each interaction, and also more likely to use us again and refer others to us.

That, in a nutshell, is the aim of the TACS system. To provide a system and environment where every client feels valued, special and part of the family.

By continuously exceeding client expectations, being available when they want us, and providing excellent, high quality services at value for money fees, we want them to consider us as an indispensable part of their management team.

The accountancy profession is a highly competitive one. Those who listen to their clients, evaluate what they tell you they need, deliver services that exceed their expectations – but not their budgets, and who do it with a smile, are the CPAs and CAs who will grow and prosper in the future.



We call this system TOWARDS awesome client service, because we believe that a 100% satisfaction score is virtually unattainable, and, indeed, unrealistic.

However, a practice that achieves 98.7% of its client satisfaction goals and tries real hard to improve will stand a much better chance of survival and growth than a competitor who achieves 73.4% and does nothing to improve itself.

A by-product of the TACS system is that recruiting – and retaining – the best talent around will become easier, and this too drives your firm forward.

How? Because your staff are the individuals who need to be motivated to go the extra mile, provide a really speedy and efficient service to your clients and help develop trust and rapport between the client and the firm.

Your people are a major factor in determining whether clients make referrals to your practice.

When TACS is implemented – and we will show you how to get employee buy-in – and good things start to happen, this creates a self-fuelling “buzz” around the office.

This is almost tangible as individuals blossom, take on more responsibility, have more client contact and develop with the firm.

Prospective employees can sense this “vibe” as can prospective clients. It’s an upward spiral.

Where it goes is entirely up to you.

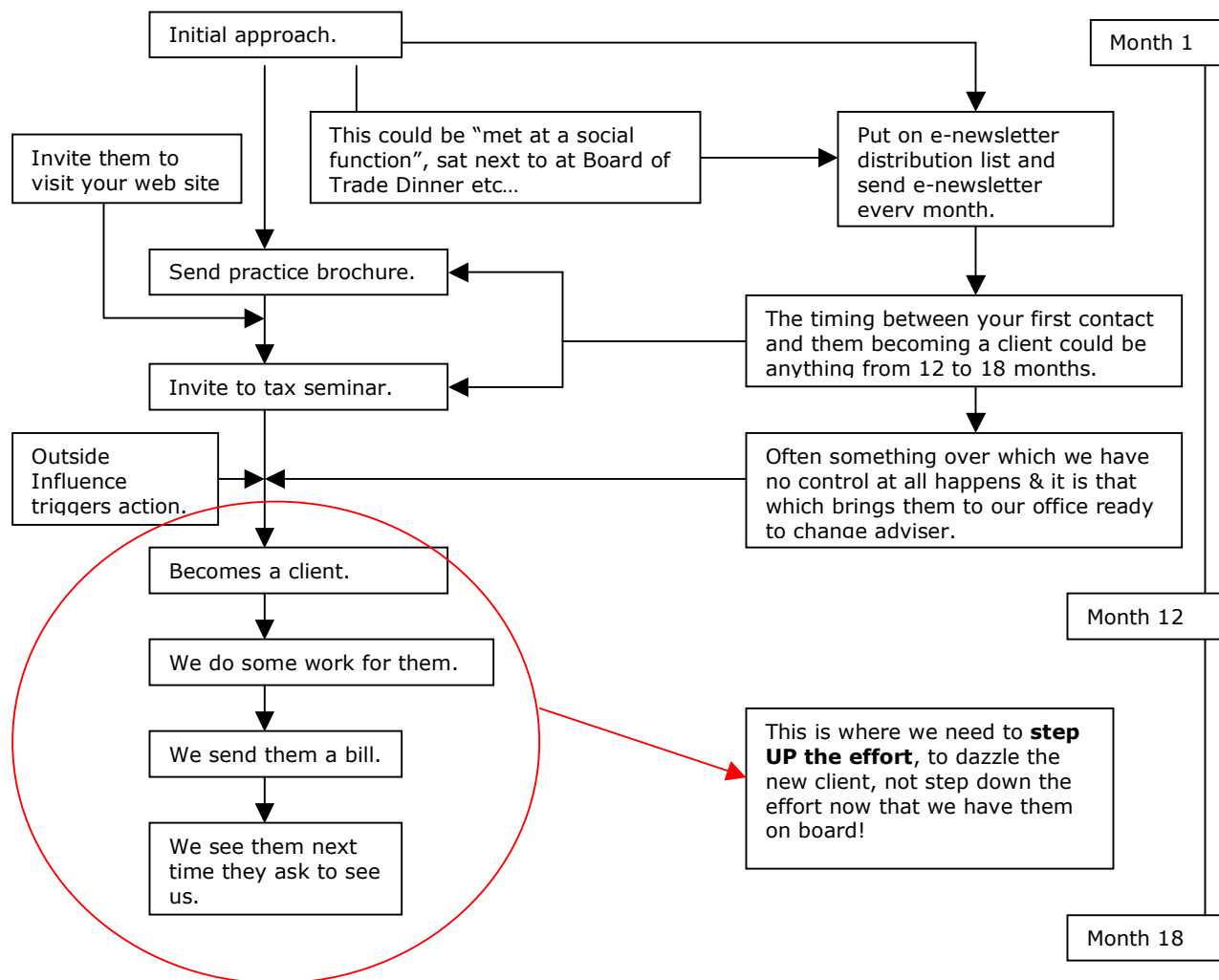
Notes

The Client Relationship Time Line

In a typical accounting firm, we identify companies who we believe would be great clients, and we market our services to them.

We also ask our existing clients for referrals from time to time. Pre-TACS, we would do this in a very disorganized and inconsistent manner. After implementing TACS, you will be very organized and very consistent in how you do this, as will be the results that you achieve.

To understand the basic principles of TACS, we need to look at the client relationship time line.



Most of our effort to impress a client is done during the time we are chasing their business. We are keen, eager and hungry for their business. But after we get it, we are then off chasing the next new client, leaving our latest acquisition in a very dangerous position.

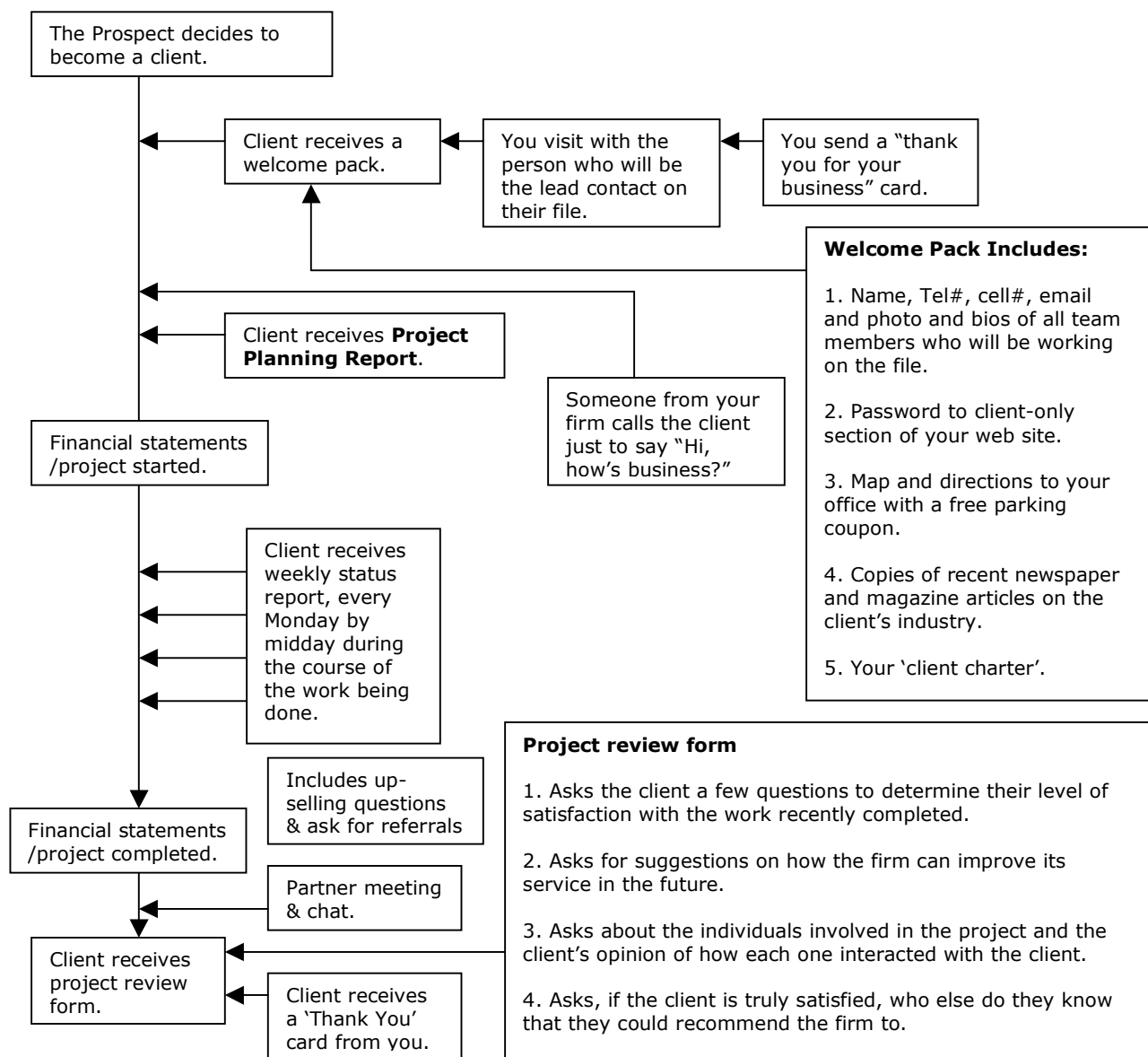
If they feel they have been schmoozed into using your firm and don't often see the Partner that attracted them to the firm in the first place, then they are likely to be highly vulnerable to approaches from your competitors. With the TACS system, you have a selection of tools that will convince the client that they have absolutely made the right decision. So let's look at how to use them.

Once A Client Always A Client

This is the overwhelming focus that we need to have. Make each client feel special. Make them feel that they are receiving special attention. Show them how much you want to keep their business. Provide such awesome service that they know that they would have to be crazy to go anywhere else.

Instead of the previous time line, let's look at the relationship from the moment the prospect decides to become a client. The previous effort in sending e-newsletters, inviting to seminars, sending brochures and everything else that happened prior to them deciding to use us remains the same.

It's what happens from the time they decide to use us onwards where you can make a huge difference. All the forms and documentation mentioned in this example are contained in the TACS modules.



The Client Welcome Pack

Once a prospect has made the decision to use our services, we need to demonstrate, beyond all reasonable doubt, that they have made the very best decision. Look at it as an 'on-boarding' system for new clients that will help them get the most out of their new relationship with your firm.

So the point of the client welcome pack is to help them navigate our firm.

We should include:

- The names & bios of all the people who will be directly involved in their case
- Direct dial phone numbers to save the client going through switchboard
- Their email addresses
- Their cell phone numbers
- A password to the client-only part of your web site, if you have a restricted area
- Copies of any articles your firm has had published in the business press
- Copies of any suitable articles from the client's industry press
- Copies of recent client newsletters you produce
- Your corporate brochure, explaining ALL the different services you provide and how they benefit from each one
- A 'free parking' coupon for when they next visit your office is a nice touch
- A copy of your client charter, if you have one

This would arrive by mail (or possibly email) and be a very impressive looking package that gives the client total access to your firm, reinforces the fact that you value their business and sets the bar at a much higher level than when they first started to use their previous firm.

You should also send out, a few days later, a 'thank you' card, hand-written by the person who brought the client into the firm, to thank them for choosing your firm as their new advisers. You should tell them how much you are looking forward to helping them develop their business over the years ahead.

Building positive expectations from the client at the outset and then exceeding client service expectations at every point of contact makes it very hard for them to even think about going anywhere else.

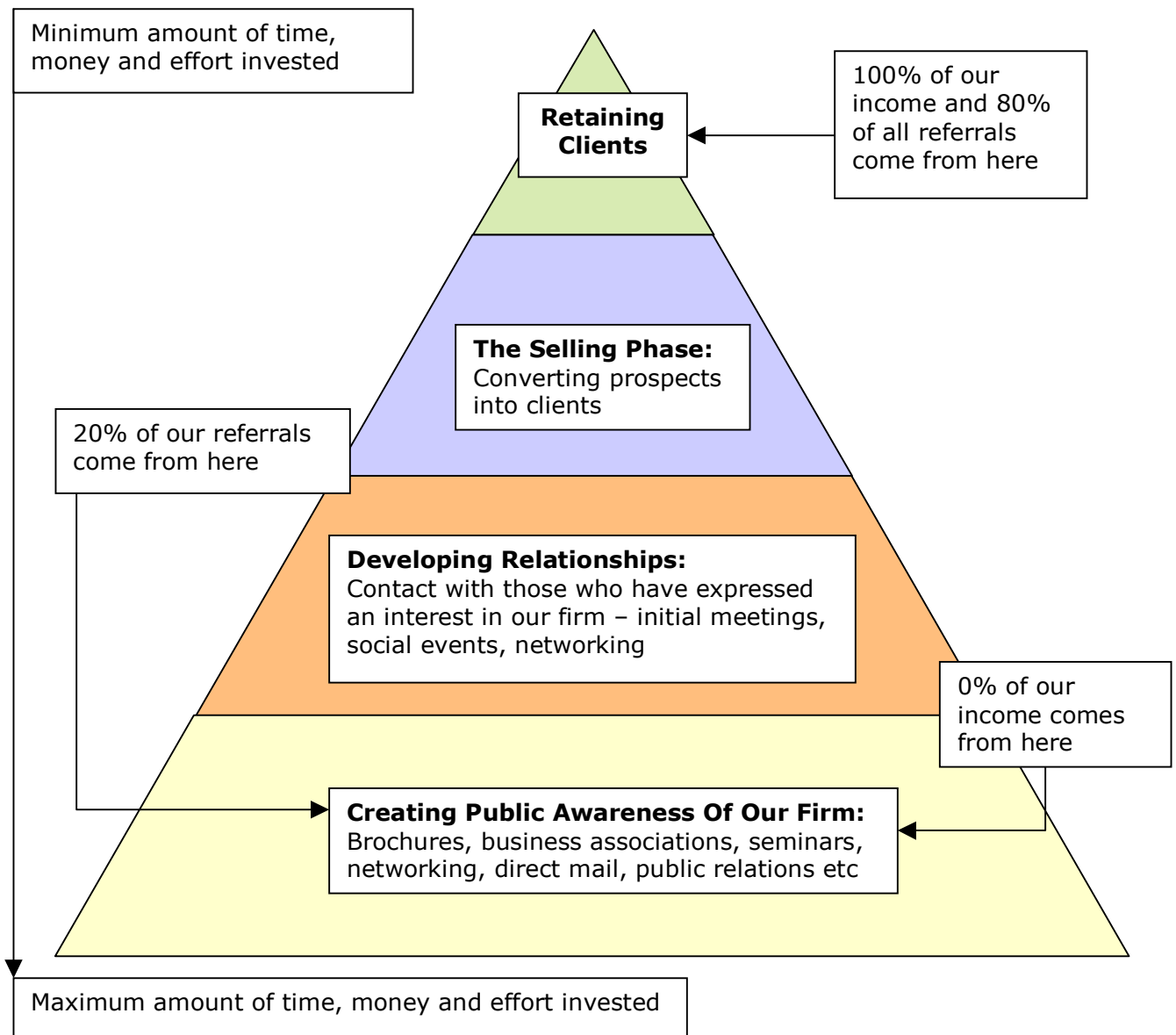
The Client Attraction and Retention Pyramid

We spend so much time attracting new clients to our firm that it is easy to forget to try to look after the ones we already have.

This is only natural. Our genes are geared towards favouring the hunter rather than the farmer. It's all about the thrill of the chase.

But, in public accounting, this is a dangerous place to be. The time, money and effort we invest in finding new clients could be wasted if we do not foster good working relationships with those we have attracted to our firm over the years.

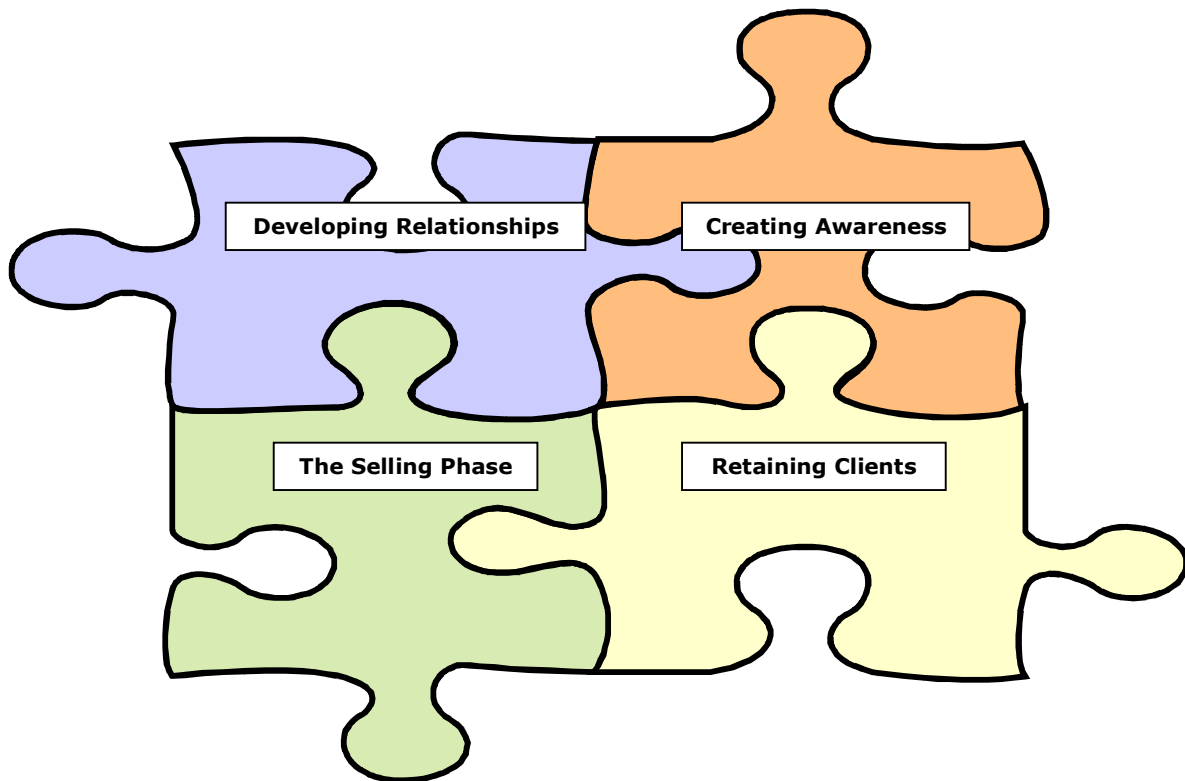
So, the Client Attraction and Retention Pyramid is a good way of reminding us that our existing clients are usually our biggest source of new clients and, by their very nature, account for almost 100% of our income.



While marketing is important to the future growth of our firm, from the Client Attraction and Retention Pyramid, we can see that nearly all of our effort goes into hunting for new clients, and not looking after our existing clients.

This is why those firm that adopt an awesome client service attitude will be the one at the leading edge of our profession in the future, as they reap the rewards of the seeds they sew with a group of clients who already believe in them, otherwise they wouldn't stay as clients.

It's all about how all the pieces fit together.



Look upon developing your practice as a 4-piece jigsaw puzzle. Remove any one piece and the picture is incomplete.

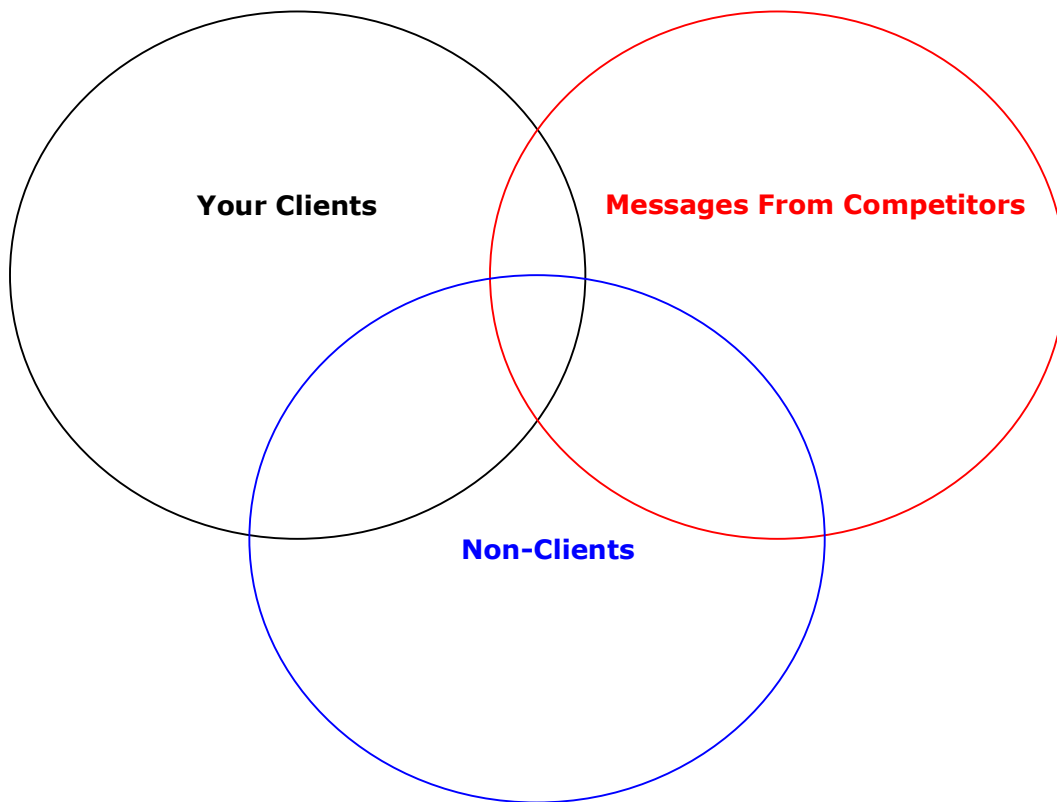
Any single piece on it's own makes little sense. Sure, we need to be doing all four activities; creating awareness, developing relationships, selling and then retaining clients, but it is keeping hold of our existing clients, amid stiff competition, that will allow us to rapidly accelerate the rate at which we grow our practice.

Your Likelihood of Generating Referrals From Clients

The best way to demonstrate this is graphically. As you can see from the diagram below, all of your clients are in the circle on the left. A proportion of them will receive marketing messages from your competitors.

Be they in the form of a direct mailing, a good word from a business associate who uses them (a non-client of yours) an advertisement, newsletter, seminar or any other means of contact, these messages often get through to your own clients.

The reverse is also true. Your messages are out there competing. Your clients are saying good things about you to non-clients, which sometimes turn into a more serious inquiry and, then turn into a fee-paying client.



How much more successful do you think you would be at generating extra referrals from your existing clients if almost every client you worked for was just 'knocked-out' by the quality of service they received?

Do you think that they would be more actively recommending you to their business associates and friends? Of course they would.

In situations like this, it is not uncommon to see a referral rate, when compared to your competitors, of five or even ten to one, meaning you get five or ten referrals for each one that your competitor receives. That's the power of TACS.

TACS Principle Number 1

There are twelve principles in TACS, so let's get started and take a look at TACS principle number 1...

DINBITL

Do It Now, Before It's Too Late.

This is best demonstrated by an example...

A Client Calls.

Just imagine a scenario dealt with in two very different ways:

Scenario One

You're in the middle of reviewing a complex tax computation, you have six messages to return and you're running five minutes late for a meeting with a client who is waiting to see you.

The phone rings, instead of letting it go to your voicemail, you pick it up thinking it's an internal call.

But it isn't.

It's a client (\$1,000 a year fee) who has a quick question and want your advice.

You exchange pleasantries and then say: "I'm sorry, I'm snowed under right now, can I call you back this afternoon?"

You write down her number and promise to call her later.

Now, with the best will in the world, we all, from time to time, forget to do things.

There are meetings to attend, phone calls to deal with, financial statements to review, staff questions and administrative issues to deal with, and before you know it, the number you wrote down has been buried under four sets of files and three letters that need your immediate attention.

Two days pass before you discover the note, and if you're lucky you will have written the client's name and their question down.

You pick up the phone with that all-too familiar adrenaline rush hoping that it's not too late.

Immediately you start off the conversation with the client on the wrong foot – apologizing for the delay, quoting how busy you are.

In this scenario two key factors occur to the client:

1. Their business isn't important to you because you took two days to return their call, and
2. You are obviously too busy to accept any new clients, so they dare not make any referrals to you, even though they know that two of their business acquaintances are about to look for a new firm of accountants.

If they start sending you more business they're thinking that maybe next time it will take you four or five days to return their call.

The result?

The client passes on several opportunities every year to pass your name on to someone else who you could help and make a profit from AND they feel a little neglected themselves. This feeling of neglect makes them more vulnerable to approaches and/or marketing messages from your competitors.

The bottom line is that no referrals come from that client and they could easily defect to another firm at any time.

Scenario Two

Same situation, but this time, instead of promising to get back to the client, you cheerfully ask what's on their mind, and deal with their concern there and then.

In many cases, these calls only take a minute or two to deal with, and although you have a client waiting to see you if you're already running a little late, you might take the point that there's no need to have two clients pissed at you when you can contain this to one.

If you use my policy of "all meetings are within 5 minutes of the appointed time, or they're free", then in this scenario you had already passed that point before the phone rang.

If you make clients very comfortable while they wait and don't bill them for your time if you run late (see our best selling e-Book, *LOW COST HIGH IMPACT WAYS TO WIN NEW CLIENTS* to discover why this is a great idea) you will find that they are a little more forgiving.

This lets you tap-in to two benefits:

1. The client waiting isn't so upset with you.
2. The client who phoned thinks you're a fabulous accountant.

When you took that call, you had the opportunity to practice one of the key components of Awesome Client Service – being there for the client when it suits THEM, not necessarily when it suits YOU. (This is one of the 5 key actions to take included in module two.)

Also, it might be that the client was calling for advice on the purchase of a competitor's business, or opening a new store, or wanting to discuss preparing a business plan to assist in raising finance from their bank.

Maybe they are planning to revise their will and wanted a referral from you to a good lawyer and some tax planning from you.

Maybe they wanted to talk about their retirement provisions and wanted a referral or some advice.

Maybe they wanted to ask you if you had time to meet a friend of theirs who has just bought a \$1,500,000 business and wanted you to be their accountant, as they had heard such good things about you.



We just don't know when opportunities are going to present themselves. Additional fees lay all around us, we just have to look in the right places to find them.

Part of that is being available when clients need us.

Every time the telephone rings it's like a customer walking into our "store" with cash burning a hole in their pocket. All you have to do is make their experience as positive as possible, provide great service at value-for-money fees, and before long the cash register is ringing up another sale.

So, back to my point.

By taking that call and helping your client you do four critical things:

1. Your client is impressed by your availability and accessibility
2. Your client gets what they want, when they want it
3. You will generate additional fee income from many of these calls
4. Your client is MUCH MORE LIKELY to use you again and make referrals to you

So, next time you are faced with a similar situation, which course of action are you going to take?

Notes



What Makes A Client Change Accountants?

It's a big decision, changing accountants, one that is not taken lightly by business people.

Time and again we hear of entrepreneurs complaining to their buddies over a beer, but when asked a simple question "why don't you move your account" nine times out of ten they respond with something along the lines of "I couldn't possibly leave Harry. I've been with him for years!"

Crazy isn't it? Well, yes. And no.

You see, many business people still see their relationship with their Accountant as a very personal one, and rightly so. Usually something really drastic has to happen to make them move.

Sure – there are those who will shop around for the lowest price, but they're not really the clients YOU want is it? Imagine working your butt off for a client, providing an excellent service, not even recovering 75% of the time spent on their file in order to stick to the fee quoted, only to find that next year, they're off somewhere else in order to save \$50 on the bill. Not an ideal situation, to say the least.

But these, generally speaking, are the exception thank goodness.

In 1997, I was a committee member of a professional services marketing group who commissioned one of the UK's leading business schools to conduct a research study into why people changed accountants. The results were very interesting.

In summary, the top six reasons were:

- 1. Not having a real understanding of the client's business.** This was the biggest single reason, quoted again and again by business people who had recently changed auditors. **He/She simply didn't understand what made my business tick" was the most quoted statement by ex-clients.**
- 2. Availability.** "He NEVER returns my phone calls." "I had an URGENT problem and the best she could offer me was half an hour a week on Tuesday." If people can't get hold of you when they need you, they will go elsewhere for solutions to their problems.
- 3. Approachability.** Where clients felt that they couldn't approach their Accountant for help and advice, or where they felt "belittled" for asking "stupid" questions, or where the Accountant in question obviously didn't have much time for them (see #2 also) then they would vote with their feet. People skills show their real value here!
- 4. Death, retirement or change of ownership.** If you die, retire or sell your practice, more clients are likely to leave your firm than those who want to argue over price! But I guess if you've recently passed-on, what do you care!

5. **Being passed down the "food-chain".** People want to deal with a Partner, and when the Partner gets too busy to deal with the "smaller cases", and passes these clients down the line to younger, more junior people within the firm, the relationship with the client is put at risk.
6. **Price.** Yep, there were 5 items that ranked much higher than price as the reason why people move their account. A remarkably small percentage quoted fee issues to be even remotely connected with leaving their previous accounting firm.

So what can we learn from this? Lots. The key issues can be summarized as:

1. **Get to really (and I mean really) understand what makes your clients' businesses tick.** But that's not all. Once you have done that, you need to demonstrate it to your clients, if they can't see it, it doesn't exist. It takes a little time, but it's well worth it.

Tip – look at your clients, pick the top 20, study their industries. Read the trade press and look for articles you can photocopy and mail to the clients in that industry with some thoughtful comments on how their business might be affected by the subject of the article. Invite them to call you to discuss (of course, this is fee-paying work that you are now generating AND demonstrating to your top 20 clients that you REALLY do understand their business!
2. **Be available whenever possible.** Remember that you are there for your clients' benefit – NOT the other way around.

Tip – block off a couple of hours one day every week in the morning to allow you to fit in any last minute "emergency" meetings with clients.
3. **Be Approachable at all times.** Use first-name terms, smile, be interested in your client and use good listening skills. Tell them that no question is too basic and that there are no stupid questions, only stupid answers!

Tip – the careful use of humor, at your own expense, making the client look good, can relieve tension sometimes. Yes, some clients do get tense about visiting your office. Remember this and smile a lot, put them at ease, and get them talking.
4. **Keep healthy.** Take the stairs instead of the elevator, eat properly, quit smoking, drink less alcohol. Live longer and keep your clients longer!
5. **Keep in front of your clients.** Sure – don't be preparing the accounts yourself, but try to take the review meetings yourself. Being in front of your clients is critical to keeping the relationship fresh, and you will be able to spot new opportunities for fee-paying work with the client that a less experienced eye might miss.
6. **Discuss fees openly.** Agree costs up-front wherever possible. Clients hate surprises, especially where their own money is concerned. The size of the fee is often not the issue, but the VALUE, or perceived value, of the services provided for the fee.

Tip - Explain in detail what you have done (or are going to do) and the savings that have resulted (or should arise) from this work.

Which would you rather see in an invoice you receive?

"To: professional services rendered \$5,000 plus taxes"

or

"To discussing your present cash-flow forecast, discussing anticipated shortfall in cash for February 2002. Discussing your options, preparing revised business plan, forwarding to your bankers and attending meetings to renegotiate your business line of credit. Successfully raising an additional \$50,000 in overdraft facilities. Our fee \$5,000 plus taxes."

It takes an extra 2 minutes to prepare but it puts you in a much better light! Remember, it's not price, it's value that is the issue.

So, these are the six key activities we should focus our efforts on initially, and TACS provides a collection of checklists to get you started that can be used in any order you prefer. In fact, module two includes very detailed action plans on each of the above points to ensure that you do not fall into any of the traps that are ahead of you.

Notes

Self-Assessment - What Do I Need To Change?



So now you have the background to the TACS system, it's time, before we move on and get started in implementing any of these ideas, to assess how our clients see us before we use TACS, so that we can measure the improvements at a later date.

We do this with the client feedback form on the page after next. Print off as many of these as you need and send one to every client, with the suggested accompanying letter, explaining that you are working towards awesome client service.

Explain that you are investing in them, your clients, and that you would welcome their feedback to help decide where you focus your initial efforts.

Introducing TACS to your staff

Everyone has a certain amount of personal selling and client service skills. This program is designed to help the firm create an environment where these skills can be showcased and developed further, to the benefit of both the individual and the firm.



The best way we have found to introduce TACS to your people, from the receptionist through to fellow partners, is to have a brief (20 minutes is usually sufficient) meeting of everyone in the firm to introduce the firm's commitment to this new program and to lay-out your vision of where you want to take the firm.

As most people are naturally resistant to changes, the most effective way to handle this is to follow this tried and tested format, set out for you below:

An outlined agenda for introducing TACS to your people.

We recommend that you cover the following issues to explain why the firm is embarking on this journey over the next twelve months:

1. Competition

It's a competitive world. We have many competing accounting firms for the clients we serve. As we send out brochures, direct mail pieces, seminar invites newsletters and other marketing tools to non-clients, so do our competitors.

A client of ours may be a prime prospective client to our competitors, so we have to assume that all of our clients are receiving marketing messages from other firms and we cannot afford to give them a single reason to think about talking with a competing firm.

We can never automatically assume that, just because a client uses us this year, that they will come back next year.

Our goal is to make their experience of working with us to be so delightful that they wouldn't even think of looking around for an alternative.

Why being good isn't good enough

To do this, we need to provide an awesome client service experience each and every time they come into contact with anyone from the firm. Be it a phone call and how reception handles the call, through to a meeting with a partner, and how that partner handles the meeting. Every time a client comes into contact with us, we need to impress them so much that they always feel that they got more than they paid for in terms of the value they received.

This program is the tool that we will use in order to standardize these issues at the highest possible level, rather than the lowest common denominator.

3. How it will affect the firm's profitability and, ultimately your compensation

There are many benefits attached to doing this:

- Clients will enjoy working with us more than ever before
- Staff will enjoy working with clients more than ever before
- Clients will, if we achieve our objectives, stay with us longer than before
- Clients will buy more services from us and be more profitable cases to work on
- We will have a wider variety of assignments to handle
- Clients will be more likely to make more referrals to us
- Longer-term, we will be able to link individual exceptional client service by individuals to salary reviews and bonuses

If we get it right, the firm will enjoy longer, more profitable relationships with many of our clients who will, eventually, start to make more referrals to us, which in turn fuels growth.

Systems will be introduced to help you provide awesome client service and you will have the opportunity to learn many new skills. These skills will help you develop stronger, longer-lasting relationships with your clients, understand their business far better and, as a result, you will be able to identify additional opportunities where we will be able to help your clients develop their businesses, reduce their tax liabilities and be seen as their first port of call, whenever there is a development within their business or their industry, for help and advice.

This will put you in a very strong position, where you will be able to spot opportunities to provide additional services to clients in areas where we may not have worked with them before – such as tax planning, business plans, raising finance, estate planning, wealth management, and retirement planning to name but a few.

When we have put all the systems into place we will be able to measure and reward these initiatives and that will have a direct impact on each and every person's earning abilities with this firm.

The bottom line is that we want to make this a more 'fun' place to work, where our people truly enjoy coming each day and are fairly rewarded for providing awesome service levels to our clients and spotting or creating additional opportunities to do more for our clients.

We will, if we achieve this, also make the firm a more enjoyable practice for our clients to work with, creating a genuine upward spiral for all concerned.

The most obvious place to start is with our networking. When we attend a business function where there are going to be potential clients attending, we need to realize what a great opportunity this is to meet, and gain permission to keep in touch with, a number of prospective clients.

Any member of this firm, who attends an event where our clients, and potential clients will be present, has a wonderful opportunity to increase their income by generating new business for the firm. Then you need to go on to explain the following...

Making business functions work for you

Just think about how many different business functions we all attend over a year, either as the host, or as guests.

They might be anything from a quiet drink after work with a client or acquaintance from the media, or a banker, to formal black tie dinners with hundreds in attendance. In a busy firm, six per events per month would not be unusual, and at Christmas time there seems to be one every night to attend.

If there were five senior people in your firm, that would give your firm 1,560 chances to raise its profile every year! Include middle management and the number could treble or more.

What, typically, happens at most of these events? We meet an old friend or colleague and spend most of the time talking to them or to others from our own firm!

Every gathering, either purely business or partly social, is an opportunity for you to meet new people and leave them with the right impression of your practice.

Look at it this way. When people from your firm attend a business function of any sort, they leave either a positive or negative impression behind. The number of times this is done over the year varies from firm to firm, but even in the smallest of practices, a sizeable number amounts. Here's why:

Partners:

Number of Partners in your firm	(A)
Average number of business or large social functions attended by each per month	(B)
Average number of worthwhile contacts attending each function	(C)

Now let's do the Math: $A \times B \times C \times 12 = (D)$

And then the same for senior staff/managers/fee earners:

Number of senior staff/managers/fee earners in your firm	(E)
Average number of business or large social functions attended by each per month	(F)
Average number of worthwhile contacts attending each function	(G)

And the Math again, $E \times F \times G \times 12 = (H)$

D _____ + H _____ = _____ Chances to create awareness and gain permission to stay in touch with worthwhile contacts generated by your firm every year.

An amazingly large number for most firms.

Hopefully you can now see more clearly, the need to devise a plan for dealing with such occasions.



Working the room can be seen by some as bad form, yet you can acquire the ability to join a group that is in full flight without coming over as pushy or self-promoting.

You can also learn how to get others to ask for your business card and ask you to keep in touch, whilst you gain their business card, and be thought of as a thoroughly nice person and a darn good accountant.

Above all, you can learn how to plan a strategy for every event you and your colleagues attend, for any occasion, involve everyone in the room from your firm, and end the evening having met all the valuable contacts you wanted to meet, leaving them with a good impression of you and your firm.

Now, are there any questions?

Editor's note

For those interested, a full chapter on networking skills, including how to work the room, how to get prospects to ask for your business card and how to get their permission to be put on your mailing or e-newsletter list are all included in our e-book, **LOW COST, HIGH IMPACT WAYS TO WIN NEW CLIENTS**, available for \$49.95 from www.marketingforaccountants.com.

Your TACS e-Coach

Every two weeks you will receive an email from your TACS e-coach.

In order to get the best out of your investment, please read these emails as soon after they arrive as possible.

Each one is designed to help you make progress on a timely basis without taking too much time away from your regular practice hours and responsibilities.

The intention is that you will be able to read the module when you receive it, then leave it a day or so before re-reading it.

Before you implement any of the ideas, suggestions etc in each module we recommend that you read each module several times before you start to take action.

Read each section, make notes on the pages provided and then read the emails we send you.

This is a tried and tested formula that works.

TACS is the result of 22 years in and around public accounting as a trainee accountant, senior manager and partner in public accounting firms, and as a consultant to accounting firms all over the world.

Follow the ideas and forms to implement them and you WILL see results.

Appendix

Here you will find all of the forms mentioned in the earlier parts of module one that will help you to determine where you are now and what actions to take first in order to have the maximum impact on your profitability and the quality of the relationships you have with your existing clients.

Contents

TACS Contact Management Form 1 – Client Classification	114
TACS Contact Management Form 2 & Conversation Guidelines	115
'A' Class Client Contact Form	116
'B' Class Client Contact Form	117
'C' Class Client Contact Form	118
Client Focus Tool Score Card	119
Interpreting The Results	120
The TACS Continuum	122