

FROM RECRUITER TO TRUSTED BUSINESS ADVISOR

Here today, gone tomorrow. Recruiters are often viewed by clients as being a dime a dozen . . . one is as good (or bad) as the next. But a select few, the very best of our industry, transcend the traditional role of recruiter to become a valued and trusted business advisor in the eyes of their clients. This elevated status is a hard-earned honor that brings multiple benefits to recruiters and recruiting firms.

When you become a true partner with your client, you are no longer viewed as an outsider, but as an integral part of the hiring culture. You have evolved from a tactical to a strategic professional relationship. You face little if any significant competition from other recruiters and you will be granted access to everyone, including the top officers in the organization. Your emphasis will shift from making a placement to managing multiple projects. And ultimately you will encounter very little fee resistance.

How can you make the all-important transition from outside recruiter to that of a trusted business advisor? A few words of wisdom may be able to help you establish this rewarding relationship.

It's not about the fee . . .

View the relationship as one-sided. It's all about them. It is not about you and your fee. Your client needs to know that your total focus is helping them to succeed. Always show them you have their best interest at heart. That means establishing open, honest and frequent communication. Work with them to define their needs and do whatever it takes to meet them. Engage them, talk to them and ask many questions. Discuss what type of talent is in the market place. Give them suggestions on how to improve their compensation plan. Point out ways they can streamline their hiring process. Don't be afraid to voice your opinion, it can change the dynamics of the relationship. They will begin to see you as a leader, an expert who offers value through knowledge and experience.

Establish a strategic partnership versus tactical relationship

Trusted business advisors forge strategic partnerships instead of tactical relationships. If the first time you learn about a hiring need in your client's organization is via a phone call - "I have openings that I need you to fill" - you may have a tactical relationship. In a strategic partnership, communication is well established. Both parties are familiar with the other's long-term goals and objectives. The client views you as critical to his success, and knows his success is critical to yours. In such a partnership, you each understand where you are going, and how and when you plan to get there.

To take the first steps toward creating this kind of partnership: sit down with your clients. Learn their short- and long-term business objectives. Be ready to show clients how you can add value to the process. How you can help them avoid the obstacles other organizations have run into. How your expertise will allow them meet their goals.



Work with the decision-makers

Becoming a trusted business advisor has a lot to do with the people who take your phone calls. Who are you talking to? If it's HR and a few hiring managers, you are probably positioned firmly as a tactical recruiter in the eyes of your client. That isn't acceptable. You want to be perceived as someone who is critical to the client's success - and to do that you need to be talking to the right level of people: the people who actually make decisions and formulate strategy.

Be an information provider

To gain access to the decision makers in any organization, you must offer superior value. Know your stuff. Ask questions, research the organization and talk to others in their space. Show them you have an in-depth understanding of their industry and their market. Be an information provider, conversant in facts and trends, and able to provide unique insight into important industry happenings. This doesn't happen overnight. It takes real industry knowledge and experience to impress the decision makers. Research, read, listen, talk . . . all with the goal of providing integral value to your clients.

The only way to add real value is to thoroughly understand a client's goals and objectives. Remember, even within the same organization, different people will have very different professional priorities. The vice-president of sales and marketing will have goals distinctly different than that of a CFO, CIO, or CEO. As a trusted business advisor, gaining an understanding of every individual's goals and objectives will help you successfully define your role in the organization. Your value is your ability to meet a company's needs at every level.

The client must see what you have to offer as essential to his success. This might result from industry/market information you share, processes you have established, or your experience and professional track record. Think of ways to illustrate the value you and your organization bring to the table to gain their trust and respect. But remember, it's all about helping them achieve their goals - not yours.

Diagnose before you prescribe

The trusted business advisor/client relationship must be taken seriously. In some ways, it is like a doctor/patient relationship. If you walk into your doctor's office with a headache and he writes you a prescription before asking a question, or even hearing your symptoms, what do you think? I just threw my time and money away on a quack. I need a new doctor. Unfortunately, recruiters are notorious for this. They hear of an opening, get a few basic job specs, don't go in-depth to explore the problem, and start the search. A trusted business advisor proceeds to the tertiary level of questioning: three questions deep to get to the root of the problem.

A couple of years ago, a client called and said he needed to hire a new purchasing manager. He said they were losing \$25 million annually due to bad purchasing. I could have reacted as a tactical recruiter and taken the job specs and been on my way immediately. Instead, I asked him to spend some time explaining the exact reasons he felt he needed a new purchasing manager. After listening to his description of the problem, I asked very in-depth questions, tertiary level questions. After this active listening phase, I voiced my opinion and it changed our relationship forever.



I suggested the problem was bigger than a purchasing problem - it was an entire supply chain problem. I convinced him to change the position description from purchasing manager to director of supply chain. Within one month, we had put on board a director of supply chain who had solved similar problems with a Fortune 100 organization. In the first year, he saved the company over \$50 million in costs. The second year, those savings surpassed \$75 million. For \$25,000 more in compensation, the company saved millions. And I gained valued business advisor status with a major corporation.

Get ahead of the solution

Positions are sent to tactical recruiters - and they fill them. There is nothing wrong with that; it's a way to make money. But a trusted business advisor gets in front of the solution, anticipating a client's talent needs before they are even articulated. This is a natural byproduct of working closely with clients, being involved in strategic planning, helping to determine the best way to attain corporate goals and objectives. Work with clients to define areas that may require additional talent due to growth or non-performance. Be in tune with a company and its people. Stay on top of demand. Know when quarterly meetings are scheduled to go over a company's forecasted critical needs. This will help you avoid unpleasant surprises where talent is concerned.

Some questions you can ask to get ahead of the solution:

- Can we meet to go over your quarterly hiring objectives and review our recruiting efforts for the last quarter?
- What staffing objectives are you trying to reach in your next 12 months?
- Looking at the next six months, what changes in your staffing do you see coming?
- How will it affect your 2007 objectives if you do not have the right talent on board?
- What are your biggest challenges you face in recruiting talent in the next 12 months?

Perform

Obviously none of the above can happen if you or your organization don't perform. Performance means delivering great talent in a timely manner - repeatedly. Without results, there is no chance for you to ever be more than a name on a vendor's list. Many recruiters get in the bad habit of sending a few "B" and "C" players over - because they haven't delivered what they promised. I strongly discourage this practice. The level of talent you send to a client is a direct reflection on you. If you've worked hard to become a trusted business partner, don't undermine that relationship with sub-par talent. The first time you send a marginal candidate over - without forewarning the client - your reputation is diminished. The second time - the client wonders about your intelligence. The third time - if there is a third time - you are demoted to the status of just another recruiter. Permanently! When you consistently bring great talent to clients within the agreed-upon timeframe, you can set yourself apart as an invaluable business advisor.

You can impress your clients with well-researched information, with your record-breaking year, with a successful deal you made, but in the end what matters is the people you bring to the table. Do what you promise. By honoring your word, you create a strategic relationship based on trust, not transactions.



As with any relationship, the good ones take work. You can make the transition from outside recruiter to hiring partner, industry expert, and business advisor. But you must be willing to invest time and energy to grow the relationship from transactional to strategic partnership. It won't happen with every client, but when it does, you will be richly rewarded not only financially but also with life-long professional friendships based upon mutual respect.



About the Author:

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