

Small businesses: They need help!

It's safe to say there hasn't been a time in recent history when small-business owners needed guidance from their accountants as much as they do now. It's becoming clear that for all their knowledge and energy, most entrepreneurs can't go it alone in these difficult times.

The expertise of professionals, including accountants, is instrumental of their success.

Unfortunately, most small-business owners aren't using their accountants to their full potential. In a recent survey, seven out of 10 small-business owners said that they are satisfied with their accountants, only three out of 10 have received economy-related advice from them.

This is when accountants can make a solid difference, and promote customer loyalty in the process. By keeping the following key considerations in mind, accountants can show their small-business clients just how valuable it can be to take advantage of their expertise in a time when it's desperately needed.

One company's survey found that less than 10% of small-business owners were decidedly unsatisfied with their accountants, yet 70% had not received advice from them on how to succeed in the current economy. The majority of small-business owners clearly do not expect their accountants to stretch beyond their basic duties.

To many small-business owners, spending money on an accountant isn't much different from spending on the latest fully loaded mobile phone. They might expect each to perform a certain set of functions, while overlooking other useful capabilities that aren't as obvious. In the same way, owners don't always know just how far their accountants' capabilities reach.

That's not to say that you shouldn't exceed customers' expectations. In fact, it's a good indication that extra input from accountants is critical.

The key is that it's the accountant's job to be proactive. Even if a client doesn't demand it or even inquire about it casually they can still benefit from timely professional advice.

If accountants take the initiative to approach small-business clients with advice during these difficult times, it can make them stand out as resources that clients cannot do without. No customer is likely to stray from a business partner who makes an effort to offer useful advice without being asked.

As an accountant, it can be easy to take useful financial knowledge for granted. The reality, though, is that most people outside the field won't have your level of expertise, no matter how basic you believe it to be.

Small-business owners are some of the busiest people on earth. Having to wear countless hats to keep their businesses running means they probably won't be financial experts. That's why they hired an accountant. For this reason, accountants should never hesitate to approach small-business clients with any bit of financial advice.

Another survey asked small-business owners about the most useful advice recently received from their accountant. The 30% who did receive advice cited the following:

- Anticipate slow or negative growth and use capital to increase share.
- Monitor all business expenses, and do not mingle with personal accounts.
- Keep company costs down and maintain a lean operating agenda.
- Don't panic, but prepare for change.

To accountants, these recommendations probably don't seem like groundbreaking bits of information. To small-business clients, however, they were valuable enough to remember and repeat. The simple fact that these accountants offered tips made a lasting impression on clients.

Most small-business owners find value in concrete plans. They can be marketing plans, individual client project plans or overall business plans, but they have to show a clear course of actions. This is why a "downturn success" plan from their accountants is likely to resonate well.

Aside from the business owners themselves, accountants usually have the most insight on the financial state of a business. They know which areas are succeeding and which are struggling, and can use this knowledge to create an economic survival plan.

To get a plan in action, first present the idea to the business owner, explaining the importance of creating one. Then, work with them to get clued into any essential financial details that you don't already have. Once you have this valuable information, you can use it to break out the plan into various focus areas, such as tax planning; profit and loss statements; financial planning; financial analysis; and audit.

The result is a concrete call to action that provides a solid foundation for tackling every financial area of the business that needs attention. It will help give business owners confidence that they can make it through these tough times, and highlight you as an invaluable business partner essential to their success.