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From The Field Of

If it ain't broke, fix it anyway: Questions marketers should ask

Published October 08, 2007 : Page 15

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BILL SUTTON

Throughout my work in professional sports I've seen executives shy away from asking clients questions that might elicit responses they'd rather not hear.

They think that a "Don't ask; don't tell" approach will prolong some relationships and deals that might not be working for the clients who purchased them and hope that in these cases, ignorance is truly bliss.

I've never agreed with this approach (or should I say lack of approach?). I offer the following questions that should be asked in the hopes of making changes and strengthening relationships before they are lost for good.

Some of these questions should be asked at the beginning and during the course of the agreement. Others are appropriate only after the agreement has been executed and serve more as a report card regarding performance to date.

■ Is the partnership (or ticket purchase) working for you as you have hoped?

A simple, open-ended question. The key is establishing a dialogue in a situation that you are concerned about.

The corporate partner can choose to address the partnership in general or break it down to specific areas needing improvement.

Once the issues have been identified, both parties can work to improve the relationship and move toward mutual satisfaction and benefit from the agreement.

■ Do you realize that XX% of your season tickets have not been used thus far this season?

This question is not asked nearly as often as it should be for fear that the account holder will determine that the tickets are not valued or used by the organization and cancel them.

While this can be the result of such a conversation, it doesn't have to be. Often tickets are sold to clients who have never been season-ticket holders and thus are unaware of the volume and frequency of games and become overwhelmed.

Other clients have tickets included in their partnership agreements and are unaware of how to use them for client entertainment or staff incentives/rewards.

In both cases, a little edu-selling on the front end (that is, teaching people how to use what they bought) would have been the preferred scenario.

But it is never too late to offer intervention strategies. This assistance can come in the form of software to help distribute tickets and track and document usage.

Or it can come in the form of assistance to the client in developing a promotion or designing an ad to use the tickets in a proactive way that can positively affect the business of the partner.

■ How would you rate the results thus far from your partnership agreement?

This question is particularly of value to corporate partnership agreements that have

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traffic drivers or redemption programs as elements of the partnership.

Is the program working? Is it generating the results you were looking for? What would be a good number of redemptions? What would be an excellent number of customers coming to your retail locations as a result of the promotion in a 30-day period?



Asking the right, and sometimes difficult, questions can help sports executives and their clients develop a more rewarding partnership.

Simply stated, the seller (team or sports organization) needs to understand how the purchaser (corporate partner) defines success. Once the definition of success is understood, both parties can work together and make alterations (if necessary) to improve promotional performance and achieve the desired goals.

■ Would you recommend this business opportunity to other potential clients?

A variation of this is, Would you provide us with referrals from your relationships that we can contact about similar opportunities?

The message is the same: Is the corporate partner satisfied enough with the agreement to recommend it to other business partners who may be considering such an opportunity?

The question might make both parties uncomfortable. But it is valuable because it offers the corporate partner an outlet to discuss areas that might not have come up in general evaluation.

It also provides the sports team or organization an opportunity to ask an excellent follow-up question: What would we need to do to earn your recommendation?

To learn the answer, I'm sure both parties could endure the initial awkwardness such a question might create.

■ If there is one thing you could change about your current partnership agreement, what would it be?

This question isn't asked often for fear of "opening a can of worms" or of being asked something that is potentially out of reach. But it does initiate dialogue. And to establish a relationship, there must be dialogue.

Why not ask it? If an improvement can be made prior to the end of the contract it should positively affect the chances of renewing or enhancing the agreement.

A willingness to go beyond the terms of the contract is a sign that the agreement between the parties is more than a contract. It is a true partnership, where the selling party is demonstrating interest and support for the purchaser after the sale.

When the seller extends itself over and above the terms of the agreement to try to enhance the deal for the buyer, the two parties have ceased being buyer and seller and have become partners. And that should be the goal of these transactions.

It's not about the dollar value of the current contract. It's about the potential lifetime value of the relationship.

Relationship marketing has been around for a long time. Relationship selling is here to stay, and those who ignore it will find themselves shopping for replacement partners far more frequently than those who take the time to ask the right questions.

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