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Getting back in touch with estranged clients.

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Written by **Jack Downton**

You may not have spoken to them for months, but it pays to re-establish contact with those fair-weather clients, argues Jack Downton.

Very often accountants lose contact with clients, whether it's former clients following the completion of a one-off contract, or current clients you haven't spoken to for a while. As the economy pulls out of recession, getting back in touch is especially important. Yet no matter how technically brilliant they are, many accountants panic when it comes to picking up the phone to re-establish contact. At the first sign of objection they encounter from the person on the other end of the line, they give up and then hang up.

Managing objections

While persuasion may not be some accountants' greatest talent, overcoming resistance from those you are trying to influence isn't an art form that only wily politicians have perfected. If you truly have something of value to offer the client and if you feel that they could genuinely benefit from your work, then this should come across. This means you should assess the client before calling them instead of randomly choosing from your database – they may previously have been a client but make sure it is indeed the right time and situation to work with them again. It is therefore also important to evaluate why the contact was lost in the first place and understanding this will help you approach them more effectively. If the client objects with "but we stopped using you because...", you will have an answer ready and won't be left to splutter helplessly.

You are also more likely to avoid headstrong objections if you've done further research – having worked with the client before doesn't mean you can rely on previous knowledge. Nothing shouts 'cold call' more than asking for someone who doesn't work at the company anymore, or asking to speak to the head of a department without knowing their name, so make sure you're up to date on their latest news.

One of the main reasons for objections is that most callers fail to consider what the person on the receiving end wants. Unless you offer something of interest to the other party, you will get an objection. So ask yourself: "If I were that client, what would make me listen to the caller and respond positively?" Consider beforehand what you want the recipient to take away from the conversation and set goals for the call other than the ultimate objective of winning new business. Securing new business will not happen straight away, so a primary goal of the call would be for example to find out what the client has a need for at the moment, or set up an initial meeting. Even if you do encounter a headstrong objection, ultimately you want to leave a good impression of you and your company.

Telephone etiquette

Exuding confidence when you call also makes objections less likely. Don't hesitate if you're speaking to someone you've never worked with before; just state your relationship with their predecessor (use their first name), and say with confidence that given their positive comments about your work, you are getting back in touch to update the client on some issues that would interest them.

Try to minimise any urges to interrupt or disagree with the client when you're engaged in conversation. The best thing to do is acknowledge their concern ("I understand the way you feel...") or follow up with an open question ("that's interesting, why do you think that?").

Finally, it is fundamental to prepare responses for common objections. For example, answer "decisions like this are made at a more senior level/another office" with "who should I speak to there?"; "we've just instructed someone else" with "let's meet briefly so should you ever need to look elsewhere you can see how we might help in the future"; and "just send me an email" (a common 'hidden' objection) with "what information in particular would be of most use to you?" to make sure it's not just a ploy to get you to hang up.

While it's hard not to take rejection personally, don't be discouraged if the 'objector' doesn't back down. It's often forgotten that the person you're speaking to may get in trouble for making the wrong decisions. Revisiting your plan may be required but perseverance will, in the end, win you more business. So, to give you that all important confidence to pick up the phone, know what you are offering, plan how you will say it and ensure the person at the other end of the phone feels the call is for their benefit, not yours.

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