



Our mission is to provide information and strategies to business owners and managers for improvement in the effectiveness of its business management so that key objectives can be realized.

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Are you ETDBW?

By John W. Turnage

Sometimes it's the little things that really drive you crazy. Small things like 23 toll-free numbers to a single company. Which one do you use? Or what about those ATM service charges, which cost anywhere from a buck fifty to three dollars, that financial institutions conveniently charge so you can get access to your money. Remember the days when ATMs were going to save us money because the bank would need fewer tellers if people did their own banking? Yes, it's the little things that drive us over the edge.

I guess that's why when I read Mike Hammer's book, *The Agenda*, I immediately connected with his concept of becoming easy to do business with (ETDBW). In a nutshell, Hammer suggests that today's clients have grown more sophisticated and are savvier than those of yesteryear. The new client demands a working relationship that is inexpensive and effortless. This does not mean the client demands your services be inexpensive – only that the cost of doing business with you be exceedingly low in cost.

Wow. This really makes sense. After all, the cost of our service or product is only a fraction of the actual cost. Once you factor in all the billing phone calls because invoices are sent out in an ambiguous manner, the time spent with inexperienced or lackluster sales representatives or professionals, the amount of time it takes in voice mail to actually get to a person, and the investment of learning how to interface with the company in the first place, it's no wonder clients are getting wiser. Increasingly, this is a competitive strategy – to manage performance across companies.

So how do companies find themselves floating as an island – disconnected from the way their clients view them? It all starts innocently enough. First, the company divides into departments to better manage performance or focus more intently on departmental goals. Perhaps they move from departments to being considered a "profit center." Now, it's the departments' responsibilities to turn a profit. Soon, these departments are vying for open resources and shutting out other department requests because it doesn't "add" to their overall vision. And then, before long, the department only relates to its departmental goals, the company only relates to itself from its internal goals, and the clients' view of the company is dust in the wind.

So where do you go from there? The first step is to take a day – or longer – to walk in your clients' shoes. How do they think of your services? Do they have to dig to find the services or products they need from you? Does it take more than five phone transfers to get a live human being? Is your billing process so mysterious that from month to month clients aren't sure what they are paying for? And what about appointments? Do they trek to your office or do you take the wide loop to theirs?

It simply isn't enough to give the client what you think they want. You must find out what you can do to make it easier for them to do business with you. Then, you must commit to implementing procedures, processes, and paradigms that deliver these to your clients – consistently and profitably. After all, your clients want you to be as successful as you help them to be.

Hammer makes a great point: If your ways of doing business are built around how your company operates, then your customers pay the price, and ultimately you will as well. You exist to solve customers' problems. Customers do not exist to do business with you.

Whether you put together a client advisory board or conduct a simple client service survey, the effort you put into this important task promises to pay you back in spades. So, the next time you are at an ATM paying yet another fee, think about the little things that are driving your clients crazy – then commit to change them.

John W. Turnage is a regular columnist for CPA Magazine. He writes often about consulting solutions. This article appeared in the December 2002 issue. Learn more about CPA Magazine at www.cpamag.com.