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The Wow Factor

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It's certainly no secret that providing exceptional service to clients is critical to your success. Nearly all financial advisors are quick to point out that they understand this fact and just as quick to say that they offer a superior level of service.

But are you really doing all you can to create truly top-drawer experiences for your clients? The fact is, in today's competitive environment you've got to please your clients consistently if you want to earn their loyalty and become a superior wealth manager to the affluent. To thrive in the years and decades ahead, you need to adopt a level of service that truly wows your most valuable clients.

The best advisors already know and are acting upon this. They emulate the models pioneered by such companies as Nordstrom and Southwest Airlines, which have built sustainable advantages by offering their customers terrific service and performance.

Why Wow?

Wow service raises the bar to deliver an experience to each client—one that differentiates you and your firm in a way that customers find unforgettable, and competitors, difficult to beat. By creating processes that ensure a consistent, quality experience at each point of contact, you satisfy clients.

Of course, highly satisfied clients spell a loyal, sustainable business, long-term customers and all the good things that result. Among them are less turnover and fewer hours spent drumming up new business.

Strong client loyalty also creates more assets for you to manage. Consider the fact that over a 12-month period, clients identified as faithful to their financial advisors gave them \$376,000 in additional assets to invest, on average, according to a recent study by industry researcher Russ Alan Prince. By contrast, clients who were moderately satisfied with advisors provided only \$17,000 in extra assets. This dynamic exists with referrals, too, Prince noted: Loyal clients gave their advisors 11.8 referrals, on average, versus just 0.1 from the moderately satisfied ones. When you delight clients, they become your marketing apostles.

How to Wow

To dazzle your clients, your offerings must be designed around the client experience—with attention paid to each interaction. We recommend using a client service checklist that spells out how the ideal experience should look and feel, based on our research showing what matters most to the affluent. It is: satisfaction in investment, service and relationship (see "Wow Checklist" on page 38).

If the phrases on this checklist accurately describe your service offering, you are positioning yourself to wow your clients. To put that to the test, we encourage you to rate yourself on each of the satisfaction factors. This rating will give you an overall picture of how your service is currently viewed.

Next, ask your clients to complete a satisfaction survey based on the same factors you used to rate yourself. It's easy to assume that you

already know how clients perceive your firm, but if you really want to find out-and want to offer wow service-you must invite feedback. A poll gives your clients permission to point out how you could improve service and helps you identify any gaps between how you perceive your work and how clients think about it. Asking them also sends a crystal-clear message that you care about them and their opinions, which makes them more willing to open up and help you explore how you can serve them better.

Best Wow Practices

After identifying any gaps between your current level of service and the wow level, you can start formulating specific actions that will take your services to a higher level. To get a sense of what some of those actions might entail, it's helpful to consider what some top advisors are doing in their own wow service.

In a broad sense, the best advisors implement processes that enable them to get to know their clients well and build service offerings around that knowledge, thereby generating much greater success. Take wealth managers, for example. According to a survey by CEG Worldwide, advisors using the client-centric, consultative wealth-management business model earn an average annual net income of \$881,000, whereas transaction-driven advisors-or investment generalists-net about \$279,000.

We find that wealth managers are much more likely to use formal systems to ensure high-quality service. For example, 85.5% of wealth managers conduct directed interviews with their clients, versus 58.7% of investment generalists. And while 81.9% of wealth managers provide their clients with formal plans, just 37% of generalists follow their practices.

Wealth managers also are much more systematic about contacting their clients regularly. On average, wealth managers get in touch with their 20 best clients an average 15.4 times per year, versus 5.6 times for the investment generalists.

One reason wealth managers can devote so much energy to their clients is that they farm out tasks that aren't directly related to client relationship management. Consider that 76.8% of wealth managers outsource their money management business to a third party (such as a turnkey asset management program, for example). This gives wealth managers extra time to focus on client contacts, thereby freeing them up to build greater trust between them and customers.

In talking with some of these wealth managers, I see remarkable examples of highly creative wow service. One advisor sends his clients about to go on vacation a guidebook for that particular destination and follows up later with an email asking about the vacation. A few advisors give their best clients a direct phone number that allows them to contact the advisor immediately. Another sends tech support to clients' homes if they need help with a computer system.

These are the types of "touches" that will satisfy your clients and help you build relationships that give your business a sustainable edge. What's more, none of these services is difficult or expensive to provide. But to implement such steps, you've got to start by getting to know your clients on a profound level.

In the end, the role client service plays in your success cannot be overestimated. As you examine your business practices, ask yourself if you are truly providing superior service. Chances are, you'll find that there are steps you can take to strengthen your offerings. Indeed, by cultivating a wow service experience, you'll find yourself with an affluent client base that will stick with you for decades to come in a growing business way beyond your wildest dreams. FP

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