

# SUPPLIER SAVVY



## Back at You: How to Be a Good Client

By Diane Hessian

*Client: We like to think of ourselves as a good client, and we're really interested in a partnership.*

*Salesperson: That's fantastic; we truly value partnerships.*

*Client: Good. Given that you see us as a partner, can we have a 30 percent discount on the price you quoted? And can you have the project completed by the end of next month? I know you wanted to meet some of our line managers, but they're just too busy, sorry!*

—from a skit performed at the annual company meeting of a leading supplier

My March column talked about what chief learning officers say they need from suppliers to have an excellent relationship, or How to Be a Good Salesperson. The emails I received included a few dozen from suppliers who wanted to talk about the flip side, How to Be a Good Client. According to more than 20 executives from supplier organizations in the learning industry I've talked with, there's more to being a good client than meets the eye.

Universally, the executives agreed that their best clients ultimately get the best price and best results from their investments. A difficult client might get a

“better deal” on the surface, but most suppliers say that deep discounts or unreasonable timeframes often force them to cut corners in the wrong areas, resulting in a substandard solution. The best clients get the best value and because it costs less to service them, lower prices.

When I asked the executives for advice for prospective clients, they made more than 300 suggestions. Here are a few of the most frequently mentioned ones:

**Be straightforward.** The number 1 theme from suppliers is the significant waste from clients not being straightforward. If you know what you want and need, tell us. If you don't know, tell us and perhaps we can help you figure it out. If you've already made up your mind

understanding the real criteria for supplier selection is extremely helpful. Is it quality? Innovativeness? Cost? Past experience with the supplier? Use of technology? Clients like them all, says Zenger, “but one or two are usually paramount. Identifying those early on saves a lot of time.” One executive says that although needs change, the clearer you are about what you're trying to accomplish, the more likely you'll get what you're looking for.

**Tell us your budget.** Rather than say “Here's what I want, price it,” give suppliers a budget range and as much specificity as possible about your needs and let them tell you the most they can do within that budget. There are so many possible options for design and delivery that a

“went to the other side of the desk.” Despite decades of experience implementing supplier solutions, they're surprised at how many clients aren't interested in their advice about implementation or other issues.

Taking advantage of a supplier's experience is an easy way to avoid mistakes. That's particularly pertinent when you're buying a technology solution such as e-learning. Bob Burns, manager of technical support for Development Dimensions International, notes that clients often refuse consulting or other services specifically designed to help avoid problems with technology. “People need to be aware that if they decide to fly their own plane, it might not be our products that are the problem when things go wrong,” he says.

**Be courteous.** The requests are basic, such as returning calls as promised. Nearly every supplier I surveyed says some clients and prospects miss commitments, make promises they don't keep, and don't show up for appointments. Don Weintraub, CEO of Rainmaker Associates, advises clients, “Don't go into hiding to avoid giving me updates or bad news. I can deal with the truth. Trying to interpret the silence drives me crazy.”

**Describe what kind of relationship you want.** Nick Noyes, founder of Insight Experience, notes, “Everyone loves those dream client relationships in which you serve as a strategic partner and long-term trusted advisor, but they're not all like that. And that's OK.” Most providers say they have clients whose requirements vary by project. For some projects, daily communication and trust are expected; for others, the client just wants a low price, no hassle, and basic materials.

“Some clients will treat you like partners and some will treat you like vendors,” says Noyes, “and you can be sure that I'll be sizing that up when we meet.

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and you're bringing us in late so you can show management you looked at a range of solutions or need another price point, we'll oblige if we know that and there's the chance for future business. If you have no intention of doing business with us, tell us instead of avoiding us. If you aren't the decision maker, we'll eventually find out so tell us up front and give us a chance to help you sell internally.

**Communicate.** Tell us your objectives and success measures. Provant vice chairman Jack Zenger says, “It's extremely helpful for clients to be clear about the desired objectives and outcomes they expect from a project. Knowing the driving force behind an initiative is also key to making it succeed.” Others agree and add that

budget is the best way to give a supplier guidance about the scope of the work. You save the supplier's time, and you're not obligated to spend the entire budget. If you know your decision is going to be based solely on price, say so up front.

**Respect our experience.** One supplier says, “I've spent most of my career in the learning industry. I have a master's and PhD in instructional technology and have worked in training departments in some of the best organizations in the world. My last job was CLO of a *Fortune* 100 company. But now that I'm a “vendor,” potential customers treat me as if I have nothing to offer.” Several suppliers mentioned their frustration at suddenly being “tainted” when they

The clearer clients are about what kind of relationship they want, the more productive the supplier can be.”

**Beware a technology solution that ignores people.** Jim Concelman, manager of leadership development for DDI, says that “with the advent of faster, better, cheaper technology and vast content libraries, we’re seeing more organizations putting learning and development needs behind cost and convenience.” An example is a decision to invest in enterprise-wide access to learning modules that sound interesting but are actually inflexible or irrelevant. The result, says Concelman, is that learning is compromised. The client spends less but gets fewer results.

**Don’t fear customization.** A provider can give you many levels of customization, some of which can add tremendous value at a low cost. The options range from changing the look and feel of a solution to tailoring the content to make it more relevant to your organization. Many customers assume that such customization is either impossible or too costly, but that’s not always the case.

**Make decisions, keep things moving.** A big complaint of suppliers is the high cost of clients “dragging their feet.” Stretched-out timeframes due to indecision eat into profits and tire all parties. Decisiveness, energy, and momentum keep everyone performing at their best.

**Help us improve.** Click2learn CEO Kevin Oakes says customers tend to call when something doesn’t work, but they don’t communicate when things are going well. “Let us know how it’s going,” says Oakes. “Have you reached your goals? Are some things working better than others? Do you know what you need next?” Then, the supplier can do an even better job next time.

**Know how to create a good RFP.** Such documents are often poorly worded or so restricted that a supplier can’t tell what the business need is. Murkiness also

opens the door to misinterpreting the business opportunity, causing confusion and rework. Says Concelman, “A poor RFP rarely results in our bringing our best ideas and solutions to the table.”

Many suppliers also say they’re often asked for lengthy proposals, only to find out clients weren’t committed to moving forward or didn’t have their decision-making process worked out. Suppliers understand that one purpose of proposals is to educate, but the expectation is that a genuine business opportunity exists. Elaine Biech, president of ebb associates, estimates it takes five to 24 hours to put together a good proposal. So, asking a supplier to go through the motions unnecessarily uses up valuable resources. Another executive puts it this way: “Please don’t require a million-dollar sales process for a \$20,000 project.”

What’s striking about those comments is that suppliers are asking customers for the same considerations that clients said they wanted when they were asked to advise suppliers: respect, mutual trust, frequent communication, understanding. In the complex business environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it’s virtually impossible to address an organization’s learning and development needs solely with internal capabilities. As products and services are increasingly niched and specialized, working with an outside supplier is a cost-effective, attractive path. Thus, being skilled at managing outside relationships will be an increasingly important competency for any learning executive.

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