



Four Ways to Get Prospects Off the Fence in 2011

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Dithering prospects – we've all been frustrated when someone who would be a really great client takes forever to make a decision. That's why getting prospects to make faster decisions should be your first resolution for 2011.

Here's an all too common scenario: You'll have a really good meeting with a prospect, you agree you'll be in touch to schedule a follow-up meeting – and then they won't return your calls.

Or a prospect will look interested and ask you to send them some information as a follow up ... And again, when you follow up, nothing.

There are a number of reasons that it takes longer for prospects to make decisions. People are busy. Inertia is a powerful force – for some investors, it's just easier to stay where they are.

And often they're genuinely unsure whether life with you is going to be better than where they are now.

The result: You need explicit strategies to get prospects off the fence.

Here are four to consider:

First, give prospects a compelling reason to switch their business to you. Second, reduce pressure on prospects. Third, build momentum into your meeting process.

And my favorite way to get prospects off the fence – communicate scarcity.

Strategy 1: Sell your point of difference

The first key to creating urgency to switch over is clearly communicating how prospects will be better off working with you compared to what they're doing now.

In this respect, the more specific the better ... generalities tend to wash over clients.





And you need to concentrate on outcomes rather than the process – how exactly are the people you work with better off as a result of your efforts?

For this to be convincing, be specific rather than general. So if you're talking about your investment process and how you manage risk or ways you help clients reduce their tax burden, point to specific, concrete outcomes from your efforts.

Case studies using the classic "problem, solution, result" format will help tell your story. For example, if your focus is on how clients benefit from your approach to comprehensive planning, show what a sample plan would look like – and then demonstrate one or two examples of the changes clients made as a result of your planning process and how they've benefited as a result.

Along the same lines, if retirees who winter down south are a big focus of your business, demonstrate the specific ways your expertise and approach leaves snowbirds better off – your understanding of issues related to US tax and estate law and your ability to help clients hedge out currency risk. Perhaps point to an annual session you host that touches on these topics and other hot buttons like home security while clients are away.

Strategy 2: Take off the pressure

Talking to prospective clients is a lot like dating ... sometimes the harder you try, the less success you have. The irony is that the more you try to accelerate the process, the more prospective clients get their guards up.

The challenge when talking to prospects is communicating that you'd *like* to work with them but that you don't *need* to work with them – you need to allow the conversation to evolve at a comfortable pace. The moment you convey anxiety or even a trace of desperation for their business, your chances go way down.

It's the small things that make a difference. For example, when talking to a prospect about getting together, you want to say "At what point in the next two to three weeks do you have 30 minutes to sit down for a coffee" – it communicates interest without conveying desperation. "At what point in the next month or two" is too vague – not enough urgency. And, "When in the next week can you sit down" risks raising red flags about your anxiety to close the sale.

The more relaxed you are when talking to prospects the better. One way to achieve that is to have lots of prospects in the hopper. If you have five prospects that you're actively talking to, inevitably you'll feel pressure when talking to one of those five – after all, that's 20% of your pipeline.

If you have 55 prospects under active cultivation, it's much easier to be relaxed in your approach.



Strategy 3: Create momentum

Recently, I read about an advisor who uses a four-meeting process to convert prospects to clients. The first meeting is a low-key coffee to chat and assess whether there's a fit. Meeting two is for fact finding, followed by a meeting to present high-level strategies and recommendations. And the final meeting focuses on implementation.

Whether your process when meeting with prospects is two, three or four meetings, you need to close each meeting by setting up the next one, ideally in the next week or two – building an appropriate level of momentum into prospect meetings, without creating pressure.

The key to doing this without prospects feeling pressured is to lay out your meeting process when you set up the first meeting on the phone. You could say something like:

"Before deciding whether we're going to work together, I normally meet with prospective clients three times. The first meeting is really just to get to know each other and to allow both of us to decide if there's a potential fit. If we both decide to proceed, we'll set up a second meeting to get into the specifics of your situation, going into your objectives, your tax situation and how you're invested currently. If we both still want to go ahead after that, we'll set up a third meeting to review some specific recommendations."

That way, at the conclusion of a meeting, you can link back to that initial conversation, saying that you'd be interested in moving forward to the next stage if they are – and asking if they'd like to book a time for another meeting in the next couple of weeks.

Strategy 4: Communicate scarcity

Let's suppose that you've met with a prospect, had a good meeting and then they don't respond to your voice mails and emails.

At that point, you could call the prospect and leave a voice mail along these lines:

Hi Jim, it's Dan Richards. Sorry we haven't been able to connect.

I have capacity for four new clients in the next quarter. After our last meeting I thought we'd work well together and you might be someone I could help.

It sounds like you're busy right now ... I'll touch base in about three months. Feel free to give me a call if you'd like to talk in the meantime.



This says you're busy too and it lets the prospect know that you're interested but not desperate. And whether or not the prospect calls you back, you've set the stage for your next contact in 90 days.

I mentioned this idea on a conference call with advisors in November. Three days later I got an email from a participant who'd spent five years on the board of a local charity with the CEO of a public company. Through persistent low-key contact, earlier in the fall he had obtained the opportunity to sit down for a fact-finding meeting with this guy and then present a proposal. He'd identified several ways to improve his portfolio and the CEO seemed interested and promised to get back ... and then nothing. In fact, this advisor had spoken to the CEO's assistant on three different occasions about trying to book a follow-up call or meeting without success.

Knowing that he had nothing to lose, he left the CEO a voice mail along the lines of the lines of the script above. The next morning he got a call from his assistant looking to book a meeting.

We have to accept that prospects will make decisions in their timeframe, not ours ... but that doesn't mean we can't do things to help the process along.

The next time you're talking to a prospect, consider these four strategies – sell the benefits of working with you clearly, minimize pressure, build momentum into the meeting process and communicate scarcity.

And then see if that helps move the prospect to a faster decision – doing this and this alone may be your most productive resolution for 2011.

Dan Richards conducts programs to help advisors gain and retain clients and is an award winning faculty member in the MBA program at the University of Toronto. To see more of his written and video commentaries and to reach him, go to www.strategicimperatives.ca.

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