

Competence first, Love second: It's important to like your outsourced supplier, but only after you're certain they are competent.

When I first started out in the marketing business, a client told me that she preferred her suppliers to be either competent and likeable, or not so likeable but still competent. What she always feared, she told me, was a supplier she liked but who was unable to deliver what she wanted. By the time she got rid of the supplier, she had grown to hate them, and regretted the lost relationship that she once had. I've seen so much of this myself in the contact centre outsourcing world – the Customer Service Director who appointed an outsourcer based on little more than a shared interest in rugby, the Marketing Director who asked his college friend to manage his customer contacts, the interim manager whose predecessor had appointed someone they knew at an exorbitant cost. What was immediately obvious to me, when I was called in to unpick the situation, was that no selection process of any value had been undertaken. Furthermore, no clear definition of the required work had been done, nor did realistic service levels, key performance indicators, or any contractual framework exist.

There is no doubt that a properly managed procurement process greatly increases the chances of a client appointing an outsourcer that is both competent and likeable. The initial focus, however, must be on the competency, and this requires a disciplined approach from the start.

When clients bring me in to find them a new supplier, I follow a methodology that has proven useful for me for over a decade now. Firstly, I will work with the client to clarify what exactly they want to outsource and why. I'll need to understand what they want to achieve from the outsourced work and what their measures of success – sales, customer satisfaction, revenue increase or cost reduction – are. Once that has been agreed we will move together to the selection process – from a long list of potential suppliers to a short list via a Request for Information, and from there to a request for proposal (RFP). Alongside the RFP, we will agree a weighted scoring matrix to make sure that all the key factors we need to address are properly assessed.

The best and worst part of the process now follows – assessing the responses. The worst, because some outsourcers fail to answer the questions and represent themselves properly; the best because I get to see some great thinking and leading edge responses, and it reaffirms my belief that there are some great OSPs out there.

Once we have scored the responses, we select a visit shortlist. Having established a level of competency from the respondents, this is where the relationship now begins. Not only will my clients get to see the supplier in action, and review their contact centre, they will also get to meet the individuals who will be managing their business, and with whom they will be dealing on a day to day basis.

Selecting a Call Centre Provider

Written by David Daly

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More often than not, the clients lean towards the supplier which they like most on a personal basis. A purist might take the view that the most technically competent supplier should be chosen, regardless of personal chemistry. This is missing the point – a good outsourcing relationship relies on the best mix of both competence and relationship, and if the client prefers a more personable company, I'm happy. After all, we wouldn't have visited them in the first place if they weren't highly competent.

In Monica Ali's book Brick Lane, the local physican Dr. Azad compares love marriages to arranged marriages. Love in an arranged marriage, he said, was "the kind you didn't notice at first, but which adds a little to itself every day, like an oyster makes a pearl, grain by grain, a jewel from the sand". A love marriage, by contrast, "starts off big and slowly wears away...all the little irritations, who would think they could add up to anything?"

Still being on my first marriage, I can't comment on his view, but if Dr. Azad was ever involved in outsourcing, I bet he'd plump for an arranged relationship.

If you have any comments or thoughts on this article, please contact me at:

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