5 Ways to Warm Up Prospects Before a Meeting

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Prospects have worries and anxieties prior to the first appointment. A five-star welcoming process can reassure them and lay the foundation for a solid professional relationship.

How familiar is this scenario? Your prospects show up 10 minutes late for the first meeting because they couldn't find your office. They forget to bring the tax return you requested on the phone, and they act nervous during the meeting, as if they're not really sure about your qualifications. After listening to you for an hour, they say: "We'll think about it." As they leave, you wonder why the relationship got off to such an awkward start.

Most top-notch advisors have a system for delivering dazzling service to clients. Your clients know what they can expect from you and feel confident in your abilities—at least. once they're in the fold. But what about the days and weeks just before they become clients? Neglect that crucial period and you're missing a prime opportunity to build loyalty and trust.

The on-ramp to your business

Business coach and Horsesmouth contributor Katherine Vessenes of Vestment Advisors calls this run-up period before the first meeting the "on-ramp." Just as getting on the freeway requires gradual but steady acceleration, the steps you take to prepare prospects for their first appointment can help them transition into your business at full speed, confident and eager. Moreover, says Vessenes, the trust you establish during the on-ramp phase makes clients feel more content with their decision to work with you—in other words, they won't develop buyers remorse.

Create a five-star welcoming process

What goes into warming up a prospect? Here are five key steps:

1. Send a handwritten note

Immediately after prospects agree to a meeting, send them a handwritten note telling them you look forward to discussing how you can help them reach their goals. Handwritten notes make a prospect feel extremely valued and give them a sense of how well taken care of they will be as clients. Be sure to enclose your business card. Here's a sample note:

Dear Ray and Eileen,

It was delightful speaking with Eileen on the phone today. It sounds like you are eager to get started on an investment and financial plan as you prepare for Ray's retirement next month. Congratulations! I look forward to helping you as you begin this new journey. See you on the 26th!

Warmest regards,
Randy Smith

(You might consider purchasing professional-quality note cards. Vessenes's latest favorite resource for them is Sassy Girl Stationery. By the way, Sassy Girl is the distributor, not the designer; the monogrammed stationery is classic and appropriate for women or men.)

2. Send an information packet

In addition to the handwritten note, and ideally on the same day you set the appointment, mail prospects a packet that gives them all the information they will need to start a successful relationship with you. Include your one-page personal bio, a brochure on your firm, directions and a map to your office, and a cover letter itemizing any documents you need them to bring to the meeting. The packet may also include a financial questionnaire you plan to use in the first meeting. Let prospects know how much time will be required for the meeting, and if you're dealing with a couple, emphasize the need to meet with both spouses. Here's a sample cover letter:

Dear Ray and Eileen,

We're looking forward to meeting with both of you on Friday, Jan. 26 at 2 p.m. to discuss your retirement goals and concerns. The appointment should take about 90 minutes. In this packet, you will find information about our firm, a map to our office, and a brief financial questionnaire that will help us get to know you better. So that we can do the best possible job for you, please bring the following to our meeting:

Last year's tax return
Most recent bank and brokerage statements
Any annuity, life, and long-term care policies
Most recent IRA and retirement account statements (401k/SEP/403b/Roth)
A copy of any wills and trusts

If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at (214) 777-7297.

Sincerely,

Jane Brown

Client Service Manager

The Smith Group

5555 Retirement Lane

Small Town, USA

Enclosure: Office Map

Note that an easy way to provide a map and driving directions to your office is by including a printout of a map from MapQuest. You may also want to include a more detailed map of your office complex, and indicate the easiest place to park.

3. Phone call before meeting

On the day before the meeting, have your client associate call the prospects to ask if they received the packet, to remind them of the appointment, and to see if they have any questions. To make this reminder call especially impressive, have your associate ask the clients for their favorite drink. This is optional, but it is one way to demonstrate attention to details, Vessenes says. One additional benefit? Prospects are much less likely to forget the appointment if they know you've gone to the trouble to get them their diet cherry-lemon Mountain Dew.

The reminder phone call is also a perfect opportunity for your client associate to cheerlead for you, Vessenes points out. "Cheerleading is third-party endorsement, and it is very effective because it continues to break down fear barriers and starts building up trust." Any appropriate words of praise will do the trick. Here's a sample pre-appointment call you can share with your associate:

Client associate: *"Hi, Eileen. This is Jane Brown, client service manager for Randy Smith. How are you? Randy asked me to call to remind you and Ray about our appointment tomorrow at 2 p.m. and see if you had any questions. [Pause for questions.] He also wanted me to ask what your favorite drinks are so we could have them available. [Pause for answer.] Great! We look forward to meeting with you. I know you'll enjoy working with Randy. He has a stellar reputation in the industry, and 25 years of experience helping clients transition into retirement."*

4. Create a welcoming environment

You may think that once you've got the prospect in your lobby for the appointment, you're home free, but there are a couple of additional details to cover. The key to making prospects feel welcome is to create the impression that everyone is expecting them. There are several ways to accomplish this. Some advisors purchase changeable letter signs or even electronic "welcoming" monitors for the reception area. Greeting new prospects with the message "Welcome Mr. and Mrs. Solomon" dazzles them and shows that you are prepared for the meeting and eager to work with them.

If you work in a large branch office and can't put up personal messages for your prospects, you still have valuable opportunities to create a welcome environment. An hour or so before your appointment, send an e-mail to the front-desk receptionist (or put a Post-It note on his desk) telling him who is coming and at what time. Ask the receptionist to greet your prospects this way:

Receptionist: *Good afternoon, may I help you?*
Prospects: *We're here to see Randy Smith for a 2 p.m. appointment.*
Receptionist: *Oh, you must be Mr. and Mrs. Solomon. Randy is expecting you. I'll let him know you're here. (If your client associate hasn't already asked for their drink preferences, the receptionist can ask, "Would you like coffee or a soda?" He then informs a client associate of their choices, and the associate prepares the refreshments.])*

"What this simple process shows is that somebody took the time to prepare for the prospect's visit," says Joe Day, a wirehouse FA in Pennsylvania. "It tells the prospect: ‘You're coming to a place that's warm and inviting, rather than receiving a cold reception where nobody knows who you are.'"

5. Break the ice

What happens after prospects are greeted warmly by the receptionist is up to the individual advisor. Some advisors like to have their client associates meet the prospects and escort them to their office. This gives prospects a chance to get to know one of your valuable team members and begin to establish rapport. Vessenes likes the idea of personally escorting prospects back to your office from the reception area after a warm handshake. In either case, here are some conversational strategies for breaking the ice upon your greeting.

Advisor or client associate: "Did you find the office OK?" (Phrasing the question in this way usually generates a nice "Yes," creating a positive start to the appointment.) If you are the one escorting, as you pass by your client associate's desk, take a moment to introduce prospects and cheerlead for your associate:
Advisor: Ray and Eileen, I wanted you to meet Jane Brown. I know you've spoken with her on the phone. Jane has been with me for 19 years. She holds this place together. I couldn't do it without her, and I know you'll enjoy working with her as we help you with your financial goals."

Client associate: Nice to meet you in person.

Advisor: Jane, would you please hold all my calls while I'm with Mr. and Mrs. Solomon? (This once again lets prospects know how important they are.)

Final thoughts

Dazzling your prospects before they set foot in your office paves the way for a productive relationship right from the get-go. Make it easy for your prospects to find you, let them know exactly what to expect, and get your client associate involved in preparing them for the first meeting.

Remember, clients think of you as a stranger until you begin building the relationship. You might be the greatest advisor in the world, but they don't know it until you start showing it. So start right away. Even referred prospects need to be carefully guided into your business. Show them you care about them even before they are your clients.

"We're going to implement a warm-up process immediately," said Bill South, a veteran advisor in Ohio, after we discussed the benefits of this approach. "I always assume that my referred prospects are already warmed up, but that's probably a bad assumption."