

Recession puts client / customer service back in the spotlight

By Bill Riley, Principal, Reznick Group



What a difference a recession can make.

Two years ago, most CPA firms didn't give client retention a second thought. The issue didn't even register among the top five challenges that firms face in the 2007 CPA Firm Top Issues Survey, conducted by the American Institute of CPAs. And that's understandable. The profession was mired in a staffing shortage and firms were much more concerned with finding and keeping talent than clients.

Today, all of that has changed.

In a world that's still reeling from the economic crisis of 2008-09, companies everywhere are clinging to every bit of business they can muster, and CPA firms are no different. The 2009 version of the AICPA's survey has client retention as the top challenge that firms face these days.

"There is no doubt that the weakened economy has shifted CPAs' concerns from staffing to client retention," said Jim Metzler, AICPA vice president, small firm interests.

The survey focused exclusively on firms, but this is clearly an issue that impacts our entire profession. CPAs in business and industry have just as much at stake here as their peers in public practice.

So what's the secret? It sounds logical, of course, but I firmly believe the businesses that retain clients and customers

are the ones who serve those clients and customers well. It's really that simple. If you want your customers to treat you right, treat them right.

Mark Koziel agrees. Mark is director of specialized communities / firm practice management at the AICPA, and he laid out his thoughts in a recent blog post. Just substitute the word "companies" for "firms" in the following excerpt and you'll see how the issue affects CPAs throughout the profession:

"As firms grow increasingly concerned over losing clients, the firms who are surviving, maybe even thriving, during this economy have found that client retention really comes back to client service. During the last few years, when firms were extremely busy, focusing on getting the work done became a greater priority than client service."

"During these difficult times, companies can't do enough to improve customer service and make sure they are serving not only customer needs, but customer wants as well. The firms that are currently winning the race are doing just that."

Well put.

Adding to those thoughts is the MACPA's own Tom Hood. In a blog post of his own, Tom offered his top three ways in which businesses can win and keep customers:

1. Create and maintain "we" relationships with customers (as opposed to "us versus them").
2. Strive for those magnificent performances with every encounter, create memorable customer experiences.
3. Lead in a way that allows the greatness of every mind in your orchestra to give you its absolute best talents every day.

In this issue of the *Statement*, we offer additional ideas from some of the top thought leaders in this space. Beginning on page 4, Business Learning Institute instructors Greg Conderacci, Peter Margaritis and Mark Slatin take a closer look at how businesses can create those

memorable customer experiences and become the indispensable business advisors that their clients can't do without. Their insights are eye-opening, thought-provoking and, for crisis-weary firm leaders, an early draft of a blueprint for recession recovery.

As your professional association, the MACPA is doing its part as well. A big part of our mission is to "provide the necessary resources for members to thrive in a dynamic, rapidly changing environment." We monitor legislation and regulation that could affect your business. We provide the training you and your staff need to stay on the cutting edge of the profession. We aggregate information about the issues that impact you and your clients, and we deliver that information straight to you. We provide ways for you to expand your professional network and knowledge base.

We do all of that so you'll have time to build your business. We focus on these things so that you can focus on meeting your customers' needs, helping them succeed ... and earning their loyalty and continued business.

I'd love to hear how you're doing that. Drop us a line at editor@macpa.org and share your firm's best client-retention practices with us. And for those of you who hire CPA firms, tell us what your CPAs do that keep you coming back for more ... or send you running for the door.

If this recession has taught us anything, it's this: Client retention and customer service are more important than ever. If we were paying attention, we'll be better in good times and bad.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bill Riley".