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SMALL BUSINESS

Small Business Week: Brush up on those hunting skills

Lack of resources, poor time-management skills or not having a good handle on what it is you're selling may be a barrier to keeping and attracting clients By Jen St. Denis

Before Mellissa Orozco merged her public relations business with another firm, she was forced to keep her client base small because her two-employee shop didn't have the resources to add clients.

The lack of capacity also limited the type of clients she could attract.

"Before we were attracting great clients that we really liked but they were smaller," said Orozco, co-founder of Yulu Public Relations. "We would pitch larger clients and the feedback we would get was that they were concerned about the resources.

"Now we're competitive with some of the other agencies in Vancouver."

Orozco merged with SIP Publicity, owned by Jennifer Maloney, in January 2013. Combining forces allowed the pair to go after bigger fish and add more clients, as well as more employees.

"Now we're able to take on a bit more, with more resources and sharing teams," Orozco said.

"The other thing that's really nice about having a larger team is that people have strengths that you can really build up. We're starting to develop individual members within our team as being a specialist in the particular area that they're passionate about."

From law firms to massage therapists to real estate agents and mortgage brokers, growing a client base is a universal challenge for businesses that provide professional services, business coach John Nieuwenburg told Business in Vancouver.

Like Orozco, some may find the solution lies in growing their business in order to serve more clients. Others may get caught up in serving the clients they have, and neglect the hunt for more business until it's too late. "When I first started my coaching business and I got my first set of clients, I thought, 'Gee, I'd better figure out how to do the client services side,'" Nieuwenburg said. "I made the classic mistake ... you completely forget about the marketing side."

Nieuwenburg recommends blocking time off each week to devote to finding new clients.

"I have five time slots each on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, which means I have 15 slots available for clients," he said. "In any given week, if I have nine clients to fill into those spots that means I have six open spots and my job the rest of the week is to fill those spots with prospects.

"Every week I have to be occupied either by prospects or clients, and as I go through my week it's my job to either serve my clients or to convert those prospects into clients."

Having a good handle on the full suite of services you can offer can also help you sign up more clients, as well as keep existing ones, said Lisa Humer, who along with partner Ute Philips runs Humer and Philips, a business strategy consultancy.

"People often forget to do that cross-selling," Humer said.

Humer also recommends fully using your existing clients, who are "your biggest fans," to lead to new business. For Humer, making clients aware of all the services she can offer often comes through listening to clients talk about the challenges their business is facing, and knowing when to ask the right questions.

"It's really a matter of understanding when you're growing what the market values in the service that you're offering," Humer said.

"I think that's a key thing as your managing the growth, to know why clients value the service you provide, and to make sure you're very clear about that."

While there are many PR companies in Vancouver, Orozco believes Yulu has set itself apart by offering a unique service: a focus on social impact, which is built into every campaign.

"We don't know of another agency in Vancouver that has that as a mandate for every campaign that they work on," she said.

As their separate businesses went through the big change of becoming one, making sure existing clients were happy was also a high priority for Orozco and Maloney. The pair met with their clients over lunch or coffee prior to the merger.

The legwork paid off for the pair: all of their pre-merger clients have stayed with them. •

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