

How to Profit from Straight Talk by Brian M. Fraley



Straight talk with clients is crucial in the Architecture and Engineering industry. It is effective when used tactfully and can save a great deal of time and overhead when used consistently. Your ultimate goal should be to ask the tough questions from the start that will give your firm or team the information needed to conduct a fruitful go/no-go meeting.

Be a fearless fact-finder.

Look back over the past several years of the recession we have faced and quantify the amount of time and money wasted pursuing opportunities where the odds were poor from the start. Unfortunately, many of us blindly start the proposal preparation process before pushing the client to uncover the true path to selection. We must be fearless when it comes to getting the facts in order to preserve our schedule and bottom line.

Know why clients lie.

The client usually does not want to intentionally mislead you. Avoiding the truth is simply the path of least resistance. In fact, some clients feel they are preserving your feelings and/or avoiding conflict by avoiding the hard truth. Others simply feel that it's the best way to get rid of you quickly.

Go on a discovery mission.

In some cases the political wheel of fortune has landed on a name and it's not yours. Perhaps a member of the board or selection committee has some negative history with someone at your firm, and as a result, you have no shot. Unearthing this kind of intelligence can be overcome with strong rapport, or a unique individual that is brutally honest by nature. Straight talk is your only recourse when you have neither.

Remember that mutual respect is a must.

Mutual respect is a prerequisite to a strong working relationship. As a firm offering a professional service,

understand that the client is in the crosshairs of hordes of interested firms seeking phone conversations or meetings. The volume can be overwhelming. Even if your contact gets paid to manage capital projects for the client, remember that they have other priorities aside from your project of interest.

Make it clear to the client that you will be asking tough questions up front out of respect for their time and yours.

Understand that some clients may not be worth it.

Assuming mutual respect has been established, the client should understand that your business is to provide professional services at a cost and pursuing false leads is a waste of your time and money. Some clients will not. In that case, your team needs to make a judgment call on whether to pursue work with that client.

Ask tough questions from the beginning.

Make it clear to the client that you will be asking tough questions up front out of respect for their time and yours. Consider mentioning this as a preface to the conversation with a first-time or repeat client when you first learn of an opportunity. As you develop a relationship, your client will come to expect this kind of communication approach and respond accordingly. As you establish a reputation for this approach, your clients will likely be more inclined to level with you because they know you will persist.

Apply straight talk with tact.

There is a fine line between being direct and abrasive. It is crucial not to cross that line or the client could shut you down. Be assertive, but tactful. Straight talk comes across as negative if the client perceives you as self-centered or blatantly out for your own interests. By being polite and respectful, you

can counter any negativity. Make it clear to the client that your polite persistence is for the good of all parties.

Plug the overhead drain.

Some firms focus on increasing revenue instead of profitability. As a result, they chase every lead without asking the tough questions up front. The goal is to pursue as much work as possible to boost annual revenue.

Make a decision: revenue or profitability?

The problem is that they decrease profitability by increasing overhead spending on opportunities that will never bear fruit. Straight talk increases profitability by flushing out the weak opportunities before the overhead money is wasted. It can, however, decrease revenue. Do you want to increase revenue and overhead or profitability? The choice is yours. ●

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i **60%** ... the percentage of people who felt they could wiggle out of their lies once discovered and not suffer the consequences, according to *Business Insider*.

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