



The

Broadcasters' Desktop Resource

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... edited by Barry Mishkind – the Eclectic Engineer

Contract Engineering

The View from the Client's Side – Part 2



By Sam Wallington

[May 2011] Contract engineers are usually concerned with getting clients and keeping them happy. One of the best ways, Sam Wallington tells us, is to take a moment and look at the relationship from the client's point of view. Understanding what they really are seeing when they look at you can help solve problems – or better yet, prevent them from happening.

As we noted in our first part of this discussion, your attitude about your job says a lot to the client. But, it is more than just having a good attitude about diagnosing and fixing problems. Your attitude as you interact with the client and their employees can signal a long healthy relationship – or a short unhappy one.

So, let us explore that issue a bit together.

FAKE IT

In the last article, I said your clients need your honesty, and that is true. But maybe the best thing I ever learned about contract engineering is that there are times you have to fake it just a bit.

Faking it might involve being cheerful when you do not feel like it or saying, “Sure, I’ll give it a shot!” when asked to fix something that you have not worked on previously. The point is, you rarely will be able to give an absolute answer to many technical questions (especially, “I’ll have you back on the air in exactly 10 minutes!”). But how you answer will tell your client a lot about your self-confidence and desire to serve them, so be careful to couch your confidence in a complete awareness of the potential pitfalls.

Having the courage to tackle something you have never tried before needs to be balanced by an underlying sense of integrity. True, something may be already broken, so you may not make it worse than that, but you will sometimes need the confidence to say, “Wow, I’d love to help you, but I honestly haven’t a clue. Let me refer you to my friend who is an expert in that.”

Also, when you get into something new, you may not be able to accurately estimate the time it will take to repair. Do not take free reign to just muddle around on the clock until you solve a problem. You must be fair to your client. For example, I remember one client complaining to me that he was paying for my learning curve – and he was right! In response, I told him that I was not going to bill him for this time, but that when I was done, he would be happy.

The result: I kept the job, learned how to do the task (which paid off many times thereafter), and he got a problem fixed. That is a great win-win for everyone.

Bottom line: Believe in yourself. But, do not over-promise, even when pressed.

DO NOT BE COCKY

This is the opposite of faking it. However, there are few attitudes more distasteful than that of a know-it-all. Personally, I find that the more someone is convinced they know everything – and when they do not hesitate to tell me how much they know – the less I can trust them.

Too much confidence may be tough to catch in yourself, but start paying attention to how many times you talk about yourself or about what you know in conversations with your clients. Check yourself to see if you are really listening to their thoughts, or just planning your rebuttal. If you ask yourself if your client could be right, and if your answer is never “yes,” beware.

Instead of self-promotion, rely on word of mouth. If you truly know your stuff, you will not need to talk about it. Your work will speak for you, and your happy clients will brag about you. That works much better than bragging.

I had a client that I amazed once. He was so impressed with some basic “MacGyver” thing I did (something any decent broadcast engineer would do without thinking), that ever since, he has introduced me to others as the “smartest broadcast engineer.” I know he is wrong (as there are so many who are smarter than me!), but those three words have made a difference with others – and they feel good too!

Bottom line here: Tooting your own horn usually makes you look worse – but practicing humility and modesty are very rewarding.

BE NICE TO EVERYONE

Do not just be nice to the person who signs your check. Be nice to everyone on the staff – even if they are not always so nice to you.

If it is 4 AM and you have been called in to get the station back on the air, treat the overnight board operator nicely and with respect. Who knows? They just might own the station someday.

KEEP YOUR COMMITMENTS

As your client’s engineer, you have a commitment to be available to them (perhaps if only by phone) when they need you, a commitment to do your best work for them, and a commitment to keep your word.

In fact, an engineer ends up having many commitments, and needs to keep them all – or avoid making them in the first place.

In a sense, being a contract engineer is an exercise in self-control. It is easy to say “yes” to your client’s request, but it is harder to follow-through consistently. Carry a planner (electronic or otherwise) and

document your commitments so you do not forget. Discipline yourself to follow-through as quickly as possible, especially with tasks that are easy to put off, like routine maintenance.

And watch out that you do not over commit. If you really do not think you can do a task, or do not think you can do it in a particular timeframe, be careful not to commit to it. Try something like, “I’d love to help you with that, but don’t think I can give it the attention that it needs to do it right,” and then suggest an alternate plan.

WHEN DISASTER STRIKES

One reality of contract engineering is that there will be bad days. Whether it is a huge storm that takes 75% of your clients off the air, or a major disaster like a fire at a single station, you will probably end up dealing with a disaster at some point.

Obviously, you cannot fix all the problems at once, so you will have to triage, decide what you can do when, and wade into the mess. Along the way, you need to over-communicate with your clients. Take the brief time necessary to make sure that every affected client is aware of your availability and when you plan to get to their problem. Give them tips on things they can do to take care of some of the problems before you can get there. As conditions change, update them.

At some point during a disaster affecting multiple clients, you may find that you have to decide which of your clients you want the most. That decision may be based on money, the likelihood of fixing their problems, or any number of other possibilities.

Of course, there is a chance that one or more clients will be upset with you. But communication can help minimize the damage. Be proactive in calling your clients instead of waiting for them to call you. Maybe something like, “Yes, I know you’re off the air, and though I’m on my way, I’m still about two hours out. Is there anything I can do to help via phone in the meantime?”

Any client worth keeping will appreciate those calls and understand that you are coming as fast as you are able to get there.

COMMUNICATE

Strangely, although we all work in the communications industry, we rarely seem to truly communicate.

As engineers, we often find it is too easy to rely on e-mail for communications – and there is a time for that. But most of your communication with your clients should be face-to-face or on the phone (unless, of course, they ask you to communicate by e-mail). The reason is that e-mail is a great way to create misunderstandings because, according to some studies, only seven percent of our communication is the words (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Body_language) - and that is almost all you get in e-mail.

Make it a priority to talk with your clients at a time when you both have time to really focus on matters and communicate. Make sure you know their needs and desires, and make sure they know how you can help them accomplish their goals. Share your schedule with them to the extent that makes sense (“I’ll be out of town next week, but I’ll be available by cell phone”).

COMMUNICATION EXTENDS TO DOCUMENTATION

Write down how you routed that wire. And set up or use a good filing system so that someone else can find your documentation. When there is a legal issue, make sure it – and the resolution – are on the log, in the Public File (as appropriate), or in another form that the station can find to show the FCC if it becomes necessary.

DEALING WITH RISKS

Life is risky. Running a Contract Engineering business carries more than the physical risks – there are economic issues you need to keep in mind.

Next time, I will talk about some of those risks that perhaps you have not considered. Just stay tuned to the BDR!

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