

Ten Tips for Enhancing Vendor Relationships

by Jeanne Grunert

When I interviewed for my current position as Direct Marketing Manager of The College Board, one of the first questions my future boss asked me was, "How are your vendor relationships?" He even asked if he could call three vendors that I had worked with for a reference for me. His concern? He wanted to make sure from the outset that I had the skills necessary to keep our vendor relationships running smoothly. For without good vendor-client relationships, a direct marketing manager's job is all the more difficult. Here are ten tips to keep your vendor relationships harmonious.

1. Make your vendor your partner. A good direct marketing vendor—your copywriter, designer, printer, mail house, or full-service marketing firm—is more than a hired gun. For a vendor relationship that exceeds your expectations, make your vendor your partner. Invite all of your project vendors to a kick-off meeting early in the project timeline. Allow each to express maximum creativity. Share information and knowledge. Provide background information. Treat your vendors like colleagues. They, in turn, will be able to exceed your expectations because they will have enough information to act promptly and creatively.

2. Communicate Clearly. Your vendor wants to do a good job for you, but you, as the client, must do a good job communicating your needs and expectations to the vendor. Clear communications is one of the basic necessities of any good relationship—at the start or en route. Provide your vendor with enough qualitative and quantitative information about the project and its nuances at the outset. A written timeline, budget, response rates, and sales goals are helpful. In turn, ask your vendor for a written estimate or proposal delineating their goals, expectations, budget, and understanding of the scope of their duties.

3. Establish a Relationship of Mutual Trust. Make sure the vendor has the information and tools they need. For the vendor, it means delivering phases of the project on time and on budget, as well as returning phone calls quickly, providing information when necessary, and advising the client ahead of time if any aspect of the project changes. Each party needs to feel confident that they can count on the other to follow through with their promises.

4. Avoid Mutual Mystification. According to Hollen Cromer, Account Executive of The Mega Group, a full service marketing agency located in New Jersey, mutual mystification occurs when "both parties leave a meeting not knowing or understanding what the expectations are." As Hollen explains, "that relationship is bound for failure. Once expectations are understood, all partners are in agreement about the end goals and what must be accomplished to reach those goals — and the roles that all will assume." Mutual mystification often what happens when a client finds a vendor they feel they can trust, but then communications break down.

It also occurs as a result of long meetings where a lot of information was discussed, but no conclusions made. Stay enlightened through clear communication!

5. Try not to ask for the impossible from your vendor, but if you have to, be suitably grateful. Remember that project that got dumped on your desk at 6 p.m. from a CEO who thinks you can whip out four-color catalogs like a magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat? Crises like these plague every direct marketer. And we all have vendors who we call at such times. Make sure you thank those vendors. Simple, genuinely expressed courtesies such as a letter of commendation can enhance any relationship.

6. Share feedback. When unfortunate mistakes occur, we don't hesitate to bring the mistake to the offender's attention. It's equally important to report back to your vendor if a project has gone well. Projects don't end just because the piece is in the mail or the ad is in the magazine. Both positive and negative feedback are vital to continually enhance your vendor relationships. Share results with vendors.

7. Pay promptly. As the client, you demand great service, and your vendor tries to meet or exceed your expectations. When you get the bill for those services, pay it promptly. Many a good relationship has been spoiled by money owed. Make sure that you and your accounts payable department know that vendors must be paid promptly, within their terms.

8. Keep accurate project records. If you like working with a particular vendor, and want to use them again to repeat the direct marketing piece you've created, it helps to keep accurate project records. Problems encountered along the way can be avoided by keeping track of them in a project log. Accurate project records aid communication and trust.

9. If you're happy, refer the vendor to your colleagues. Ask for a stack of business cards and pass them along. I always keep five cards on hand from vendors whose work is excellent to recommend. Your vendor—and your colleagues—will thank you for it!

10. Use the Golden Rule. Nobody wants to be confused, paid late, yelled at or ignored for good work. Keep the golden rule in mind for all of your vendor interactions—a good bit of advice for all our relationships!

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