

HOW TO CONVERT FANS TO ADVOCATES: BENEFIT FROM POWERFUL RECOMMENDATIONS WITHOUT BEGGING FOR THEM

Years ago I worked for a consulting firm with supremely happy clients. Our clients considered us their go-to consultants, giving us several important projects each year. Nearly all these clients told us they'd happily refer their colleagues.

But they didn't. I can't recall a single instance where one played a role in closing a new client. Not once in eight years. Imagine the increase in growth and profitability if each client had led to just one additional project per year.

We made a lot of Fans, but created no Advocates. Our Fans wished us well, but felt no stake in our success. Advocates see the world differently. Think about the passion of Apple or Prius owners. They feel hurt—even offended—if you buy something else.

Marketing that punches above its weight

Study after study shows customer recommendations pack a mightier punch than your own marketing. Take Shelly Symonds. Between her four Lexus cars and the 14 friends she encouraged to purchase a Lexus, Shelly is a \$700,000 sales machine for Lexus. The cost to Lexus: not a dime.

If you want your marketing to punch above your weight, you must develop and enable Advocates like Shelly Symonds. Your ability to accomplish more while spending less hangs in the balance.

Create leverage with the Three Essential Questions

If referrers have confidence in your broader abilities, they can offer powerful recommendations in a wide range of situations. But how do you generate the necessary confidence beyond their direct experience?

Credible, concise and memorable information about what your firm does extremely well gives your Advocates the confidence needed to project their direct experiences onto your broader capabilities. Much of what they need comes from answering the Three Essential Questions from your customers' perspective.

1. **What does your firm do especially well?** Not the boundaries of what you could do, but the core where you consistently excel. The sweet spot where you hit all home runs.
2. **Who is your ideal customer?** Not all customers are alike. Some are simply better for your business than others. Consider using personas so you are not limited to traditional segments.
3. **Why do your best customers select you over other firms?** The tendency is to answer from your own perspective, asking why you would hire your company, not why *your customers* actually do. Think beyond your actual offering. I've never seen trust on a price list, but it's a huge part of the business relationship for many firms.

Putting the Three Essential Questions to work

Your Advocates want to be connectors, not sales people trained on your offer. Your mission is to ensure their advocacy comes easily and naturally. The Three Essential Questions form a template for easy to remember stories highlighting your compelling value. This type of consistent narrative can reach far beyond the referrer's direct experience.

Escaping the trap

Some of my old employer's clients actually did introduce us to colleagues. They said we were "smart" and did "great work." We were

thrilled and used their quotes in our own marketing. No new business resulted and the ensuing crickets left us scratching our heads. What went wrong?

In the ensuing years, I've seen the same trap play out many times. "Smart" and "great work" are nice, but don't say why you are an obvious choice for a potential customer's needs. Anything less only adds to the information cacophony enveloping your potential customer.

Advocates are the vehicle for delivering the Powerful recommendations that escape this trap.

Architecting Powerful Recommendations

I can't emphasize this enough: the failure to convert Fans into Advocates is the single biggest sales and marketing gap at mid-sized firms. Closing the gap doesn't require black arts or navigating a nearly impossible set of actions. Powerful recommendations are fueled by attention to referrer motivations, what referrers say about you, and the tools provided to make it easy for them.

1. Understand referrer motivations

Your customers (mostly) don't make referrals as a favor to you. Every recommendation puts the referrer's own reputation at risk. If your results are as great as I say they are, your potential customer (my colleague) thinks I'm smart. My influence, or social capital, grows. If you deliver short of expectations, my reputation and influence take a hit. We humans have excellent noses for sniffing out risk, so people avoid these situations. It's part of our human nature.

2. Expand limited experience into broad confidence

Referrers make powerful recommendations when they're confident your performance will make them look good. Their colleague—your potential customer—wants to know:

- a) Does your firm do what they need?
- b) Has your firm had success in similar situations?
- c) Why is your firm better than other options?

It invariably surprises my clients how little their customers know about their firm beyond the customer's direct experience. Waiting for identical situations to emerge usually means those willing to make recommendations find few opportunities. It's a situation offering no leverage.

3. Get recommendations, not referrals.

One way we guard our reputations is with weak or conditional referrals: "You might give Bruce a look" or worse "Here are several consultants you might call." These less-than-ringing endorsements convey a clear message: "Don't blame the referrer if the recommendation doesn't work out."

By contrast, the signal to noise ratio improves when someone tells a colleague your firm "is ideal for your situation because..." You're almost certain to get a call. You must still close the deal, but the potential customer's expectations are set high, meaning you start with a competitive advantage.

Take the next step

Converting Fans into Advocates is the third of four Principles at the heart of the Strategic Marketing 3.0™ framework. Harnessing strong customer relationships is an essential part of marketing that accomplishes more while costing less.

Getting started is easy. A Marketing Audit offers the ideal first step for firms dependent on seller-deliverers and other non-professional marketers. The Marketing Audit delivers a realistic assessment of your current efforts along with clear and actionable recommendations for accomplishing more with the resources you already have.

Great marketing doesn't require a zillion dollar budget.
Get more tips at LaFetraConsulting.com/keeplearning