

Practice Lifecycle

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Creating an Emotional Client Experience

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My family visited a couple of college campuses with my son, now a high school senior. The visits took place on a beautiful fall day. At one school, the day was enhanced by colorful trees reflected in the lake. It was Friday morning, homecoming weekend, and people were excited about the football game. The student tour guide was knowledgeable, personable and funny. The campus seemed vibrant and alive.

The other campus was a commuter school and many of the students already had left for the weekend when we arrived. One of my nephews showed us around because we called too late to arrange an official tour. He did a great job but did not know the historical details and lacked the optimism of an official guide.

Remembering how much I enjoyed campus activities in my college days, I asked an admissions counselor about student activities. He said the college provided a few activities but that the city provided many diversions for the students. As we returned to our car, I thought about those off-campus diversions while walking down empty sidewalks in the shadows of large, darkened buildings. My whole family came away with a positive, emotional connection to the first school that was hard for the second school to match.

It is that emotional connection that provides a strong brand. The college, with a little help from the weather, provided a positive emotional experience consistent with its brand message. To create that connection with your clients, align your brand message with your advice, your relationship attributes, your client service, your physical space and your amenities. These five elements comprise your client experience.

Your client experience should reflect your personality and that of your clients. It should reflect a thoughtful consideration of your clients' needs and consistent delivery to your clients. It should help your clients implement your advice.

Review the elements of your client experience periodically to make sure they continue to align with your clients and their needs. One of the most effective ways to design your client experience is to think about one of your best clients and design the experience to meet their personality.

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Advice

Design an advice process you can replicate with your best clients. Begin with a favorite client who has been well served and review the services you provided in detail. The detailed advice process you used with that client will provide a template for a strong process you can use across your client base.

With the financial planning process as a guide, you can design a more detailed, customized process for your clients. Knowing how to describe and consistently apply the steps in the process will give you a marketing advantage and create efficiencies in your practice.

Relationship attributes

Advisors have found success with many different relationship models. Some invite clients to their homes to socialize, learn the names of their clients' grandchildren and go on vacations together. Other advisors keep the relationship on a strictly professional level and do not socialize with their clients at all.

Client service

Determine how often you will meet with clients and the format of these meetings. Many advisors want to meet with their clients four times per year but actually meet less often. Develop a structure and agenda for your meetings so both you and the client know the main topic of each meeting. Again using that favorite client, design a client service approach that meets all of the client's needs.

Physical space

Define your physical space based on the way you want to interact with your clients. Chairs at your desk tell your clients that you are in charge of the relationship. A small conference table in your office suggests a more collaborative approach. A sofa provides a more intimate, relaxed setting for your meetings. Determine what office design fits your style.

Your physical space should reflect your tastes and those of your clients. The dark woods and rich fabrics of a traditional banking office were designed to suggest substance, tradition, wealth and stability. Determine the attributes you want your décor to convey to your clients and design your space to convey these attributes.

Amenities

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Amenities include the decorations and magazines in your lobby, the refreshments you offer and the dress code in your office. You want the magazines to remind them of their goals and their vision for their life. You might use magazines to remind your clients of their dream vacation, of their favorite charities or of their retirement lifestyle. Think about all aspects of the environment from this perspective and determine how your environment can support your clients' long-range goals.

Your dress code and refreshments should help your clients feel important and comfortable. If your clients prize status, make sure you treat them with the status they think they deserve. Some might be offended if you serve them coffee in a Styrofoam cup; others might be uncomfortable using fine china. Some clients would feel more comfortable if you are casually dressed; others would prefer you wear a business suit. Get to know your clients to understand how they want to be treated.

Colleges have learned that the campus visit influences students' choice of college. Some colleges use this knowledge to influence prospective students. You also know that your clients make choices based on emotional responses. Structure your client experience to elicit a positive emotional response for your clients.

Little things have a significant impact on your brand. By paying attention to these details, you can deliver a consistent product in a consistent environment for your clients. You can begin to build your brand image and produce an emotional response in your clients.