

Getting Client Commitment

Once you are sure that the client understands your solutions, there will come a point when you will need to clarify whether or not the client is serious about engaging you. It may not be necessary or even appropriate for the client to instruct you there and then, particularly if the solution is relatively complex and/or the client is not the only decision maker.

However, it is critical to try and understand the client's real intentions before you leave.

It is also critical to understand the next steps that will result in a final decision and to ensure the client is fully committed to the next steps.

Suggested steps to better understand the client's intentions

Step 1:

Concisely summarise the key attributes of your solution to solve the client's problems and achieve the client's bottom line goals. Try to summarise in sets of three items, which might be closely related to emphasise a single point (e.g. "Cost savings are achieved through price reductions, efficiencies and practical technology.") or might be quite separate to gain greater coverage (e.g. "This solution provides you with real cost savings, greater control over your business and will free you up to focus on maximising value.") These items should be tied to the client's top of mind problems and priority bottom line goals.

If unsure, use the classic business measurement trilogy of cost, quality and time. This approach works through the principle of triples – a curious pattern where three things given together act as a coherent set of three hammer blows that give a compelling message.

Step 2:

If you believe that it serves the client's best interests to implement your solution sooner rather than later (i.e. delaying a decision will in some way be to their detriment), you should emphasise the value of acting soon. For instance:

- What is at stake for the client if they don't take action in the near future? Is there an opportunity cost, and what is the quantum of that cost?
- How long will your offer last? If there is a genuine limit on the availability of your offer, that limit should be emphasised. A by-product of emphasising such a limit is the scarcity principle – I want now what I may not be able to get in the future. This is an example of human hardwiring, which can subconsciously drive someone's decision making. However, manufacturing scarcity may put your integrity into question.

Step 3:

You need to ask the client if they want to instruct you. This appears to be a simplistic point, but surprisingly, many professionals simply fail to clearly gauge where the client is at in their decision making process. You don't need to be obtuse but you do need to be clear. Below are examples of how some might ask this question but we suggest you finesse the wording of your own questions:

- "Would you like to implement the solution?"
- "Would you like to move this forward?"
- "Is it of value to move ahead with this project?"
- "Given what we have discussed, is this something you would like to run with?"

It's important at this stage to remember the concept of "quid pro quo". That is, if you ask me for something then I will ask you for something in return. When you are closing in on finalising the deal and the client asks for a little bit more – like a price reduction, or to re-scope your proposal, or to include additional components – then you should ask "If I do that, will you give me the business?"

Unfortunately many professionals find this approach too "sales-y" and vulgar. But that belief is totally misguided. It is not only highly pragmatic, but it is also best practice negotiation. Not only that, the client knows they are asking you to do something for them, so they are not offended when you ask them for something in return. Quid pro quo.

If the client agrees, then you have just won the deal. If the client says no, then there is a very high likelihood that they are never going to give you the job – no matter how many hoops of burning fire they make you jump through. All they are doing is using you as some kind of sparring partner for the provider that they have already decided they will choose. If the client says no, decline gracefully and walk away. If the client does want your solution after all, they will very quickly invite you back and most likely take their extra demands off the table at the same time.

Also note the different communication styles we assessed in the "Client Styles" tactic. You can afford to be more direct with a big picture or bottom line style but may need to be more careful with a detail or people focussed style.

Another potential question to ask the client may be: "If I was to ask you say on a scale of 1 to 10 - 10 being we definitely will move ahead and 1 being we definitely won't – where would you say you are right now?" This might be a useful technique if you are struggling to clarify the client's position or if things are stalling. This technique also helps to identify objections or barriers. You can choose to be even more direct by simply asking outright for their objections and concerns. You should really have extracted objections beforehand while discussing your solution, but it is not uncommon for more objections to arise with further prompting.

Step 4:

The key to dealing with objections successfully is your attitude. Rather than going on the defensive and assuming an objection means a “no”, treat any objection as an opportunity to talk further with the client, to better understand their needs and to appreciate that the objection is probably derived from a desire to learn more about the solution.

There are four straightforward steps to deal with objections:

1. Acknowledge the client's objection and make sure you understand the objection and the reasons behind it.
2. Provide a confident and succinct answer (ideally thought through beforehand).
3. Ask the client again if they want to move ahead.
4. Be quiet and wait for a response.

After dealing with an objection, ALWAYS ask the client if there are any other objections. You want to get them all out on the table and deal with them while you are in “objection handling mode”. You also want to use it as an opportunity to introduce a quid pro quo situation. That is: “If I deal with these objections to your satisfaction, will you go forward?”

It can be very powerful to answer objections or queries by referring to the experiences of other clients in similar situations (particularly if it is difficult to give a concrete answer there and then). Say, for instance, the client wants to know what your final fee will be, and there is a risk that the client may perceive your fee as expensive. Your answer could be: “In our experience, clients in similar situations pay between \$10k - \$20k and tell us that the return on that investment tends to be \$100k - \$200k”. Note that this answer features dollar ranges to cope with uncertainty, uses irrefutable facts and presents the fee in the context of a value outcome.

Finally, a useful question to ask and check on the client's commitment is one which starts with “if”. For example, “If these objections were resolved would you then be prepared to move forward with us?”

Quid pro quo.

The key take-away's for you from this lesson should be:

1. Summarise your solution in the context of the client's bottom line goals.
2. The principle of scarcity can be used, but only if it is used in a genuine way and not in a “cynical” way (i.e. just to try and advance the deal).
3. Make sure you actually ask for the business. It demonstrates your enthusiasm and the client expects it.
4. QUID PRO QUO.