

Maybe Your Outsourcer Just Isn't That Into You

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You know how it is. You've been with someone for years, but the zing is kind of gone. You feel as though they are taking you for granted, maybe their performance is slipping. So you start making inquiries, hit a website and fill in some information. Maybe someone will call you back. Maybe, if the vibe is right, they might even propose meeting. And after getting to know one another, having spent a bit of time in this "courtship", especially if you start to like them a lot, you might propose a merger of sorts. If, after all this time and effort, you are then rejected, you might be taken particularly aback. But, sadly, it happens.

Finding that perfect outsourcer match is so important. We all know that going to an outsourcer isn't only about reducing our operational costs. We employ outsourcers for a variety of reasons: because of their management expertise, because they can handle the call volume fluctuations that are often our bane, they have all the great contact center technologies already up and running, they have workforce flexibility that we can only dream of, and so on. But still, deciding to outsource and finding your match is a big decision.

Let me switch gears and have a Dr. Phil moment: but what about them, your potential partners? What about their goals and aspirations?

Among the most important decisions an outsourcer can make is choosing which deals to bid on and the strategies for winning and managing that line of business. For the rest of this discussion, I will focus on some of the considerations associated with your outsourcer's choices and considerations, and not the other way around. By understanding the issues of your potential partner, you might be better able to respond in such a way that meets their needs, and then, in concert, yours.

Your Outsourcer's Wants and Desires

Like every real business, we know that your outsourcer's primary goal is to make money, and in order to make money they have to win long-term contacts. So we all can expect, during the courtship phase, they will be at pains to impress you. They will dress up their operation, wine and dine you, and truly put their best foot forward. In the heat of the moment, they will make promises that, while well intentioned, may be difficult to keep.

But their desire to win your business may be a tad more complicated than simply wanting to win a single long-term deal at favorable rates (on the other hand, it may also be as simple as wanting to win the long-term deal with favorable rates). While they may be shooting for a home-run, where they win a big chunk of your business with wide margins, they may be happy just getting to first base by winning a small deal, even at a

small financial loss, to provide the opening for getting future business or a great reference.

Which brings us to point number one: *Be prepared to spread the love* . By that, I mean, it is important to your outsourcer that they have the potential to win future business with you and others. Therefore, you should be very willing to be an advocate; entertain providing references and case studies, be willing to sing the praises of your outsourcer to their other prospective partners (they are, after all, open relationships), and to other internal business units. Knowing this, your outsourcer will strive to keep you happy.

But let me also add point number one and a half: *Don't take advantage of your partner* . It is in nobody's interest that your outsourcer takes a deal with you that loses your partner significant money. This is a two way street, and both partners need to be happy with the relationship. Absolute, tighten -the-screw pricing, is very shortsighted.

What else do your suitors look for? We all know that every marriage requires a lot of work (aside: except mine, Honey). So a willingness to be flexible and to give your outsourcer the appropriate amount of freedom and space is not a bad thing. Look, there will be stress in this relationship. There will be times when performance takes a hit and they'll come to you for forgiveness. It is your response that provides the appropriate give and take.

I've heard that real love means never having to say you're sorry. In our relationship, it sometimes means giving your partner some slack. In return, you can expect flexibility from them.

Which brings us to point number two: *Be easy to get along with*. Certainly don't be a doormat, but at the same time forgiving small service mistakes is a sign of a healthy relationship. It is a partnership, after all.

Throughout the bidding process, when an outsourcer is sizing you up, one of their big fears is that they will enter into a relationship with someone, and as soon as the relationship is consummated, their partner will change for the worse. Risk is the outsourcer's curse. For your outsourcer needing to come back to you with additional charges, maybe even to renegotiate a deal, is a headache that nobody truly wants.

Which brings us to point three: *Let them know the true you*. Provide them as much information as you have. Provide them with actual call volumes, with handle times and all the appropriate distributions. Give them all the data that you have.

At the same time, when starting a center from scratch, where you do not have solid data, it is important to make your best honest guess, and provide data on similar programs that you may already have in place. Your contracts must reflect contingencies associated with the uncertainty of the project. You simply do not want your outsourcer bearing all of this risk (see point 1.5 above).

The Ideal Marriage

On the radio the other day, I heard a relationship expert give advice to a person who was flabbergasted by their spouse's habits - habits that the complainer knew of long before their marriage. In essence, the radio personality told this person that it was their own fault, that they knew what they were getting themselves into, and that you cannot and should not expect to force your spouse to change. Her answer to the flabbergasted spouse was to find a way to live with the irritations.

You can almost hear a psychologist giving us the same advice about our relationship with our outsourcers. The point to this is to make sure you truly get to know your outsourcer well. Simply put, you should take great pains to know what you're getting into.

There is a great technique for doing this (and point number four): *think about the future and do some planning together*. When you have narrowed your list of suitors to just a few, you can ask them to walk you through their planning process.

We all have our long-term planning techniques. Some of us have homegrown strategic planning tools (mostly Erlang spreadsheets), and more and more of us are using third party engineered planning tools (mostly Simulation -based systems). It is likely that your outsourcer has invested in these advanced planning tools to help them respond to RFP's. Try to understand their planning process, and if possible plan with the same tools and the same set of numbers that they do.

By together agreeing on the overall strategic planning scenario that gets your outsourcer to your service goals, your knowledge of their operation and planning capabilities greatly improve. You will know whether your partner has the analytic capabilities to support your business. Once you've chosen your partner and the partnership is up and running, you can check whether you both are executing on the plan.

As the world changes and the plans need to be altered, you are in a great position, arguing not about unknowns, but discussing the assumptions in your new planning scenarios.

Look these "marriages" aren't for everyone, but if you get them to work, they can be really productive (just ask the missus).