

Getting to the trusted advisor/grower relationship. Technical knowledge is only half the story!

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Those of us who have, or wish for, a long advisory/consulting career with agribusiness have probably already recognised that effective relationships are based on more than just technical skills.

While these technical skills are fundamental for entry into “playing the game” they can only serve for so long. It’s when we advisors realise that we need to go further than just providing technical skills that we move into the space of providing longer term relationship-based advice.

I don’t have the expertise or credibility in providing advice as to how to apply technical skills, I do, however, have some expertise and experience in the strategies around human behaviour that can move the relationship to the exalted level of being a trusted advisor.

Some clues for you in getting to the trusted advisor status level with our grower clients include:

Play the long game

Understand that to get to the trusted advisor status requires both good and challenging times. It’s not so much whether you were there for the good times that matter, but rather were you there for the bad times - the droughts, the fires, the family disputes and so on. The trusted advisor/grower is like a marriage without the benefits – in good times and bad, for richer or poorer. It takes time for trust to be developed by all parties, so recognise the long-term commitment that will be required. While playing the long game, don’t drop the ball on the short-term stuff like contemporary technical knowledge. Invest effort in the long term. Develop a routine of meetings, networking, calling, emailing and generally staying in touch with people - even (in fact, especially) when you don’t have anything to sell. Remember the value of “pastoral care”.

It’s not about you

It’s about them, their businesses, challenges and lives. There will be times when the issues being faced by the client can’t be met by you. There is no greater sacrifice than referring clients on to other sources – and no greater long-term benefit for your relationship with the client.

Get your ego and need for relevance under control.

There is a BIG difference between “wants” and “needs”

Take time out to know the difference between what a client wants and what they need. A critical characteristic of a trusted advisor is that they are curious about their client’s ambitions, motivations and context. A trusted advisor should seek to understand in order to be understood.

Really understand the ambitions of your clients to appreciate where this request fits and how it will contribute to the achievement of them. Sometimes the best question to ask is “Why?” and the best piece of advice or answer is “No!”

You need to deliver

Quite simply, you need to do what you say you will and if you can’t, then you must have a good reason and call it early.

No grower likes a surprise. They have enough of them in their everyday life. If the relationship is solid and built on both trust and success, the trusted advisor has a “few credits in the bank”. However, understand the significance of making a withdrawal.

Should a “withdrawal” be made, the client needs to know early and be presented with a Plan B that they can choose to adopt. Don’t leave clients in the lurch!

You must know your stuff

While I have said the trusted advisor relationship goes beyond technical advice, the technical advice is still important. Credibility built on authority is a major component of getting to and maintaining the trusted advisor status.

Maintain your skills level and ensure professional development is part of your calendar. Develop best practice ideas outside your industry.

Be respected – not liked

We all want to be liked. Unfortunately, as a trusted advisor this is not always possible. What’s more important is that you are respected. To be respected, you must be all those things I have already spoken about as well as be prepared to make the hard decisions and the difficult “calls”.

Trust will come from performance and who knows that may even result in being liked!

You are dealing with the “whole person.”

Emotions are part of the relationship. Be comfortable displaying your own emotions and be comfortable responding to your clients’ emotions. Empathy (not sympathy) is an important skill of the trusted advisor.

Be prepared to make emotional connections. Before this is possible, you need to be emotionally mature to allow yourself to respond to emotive situations.

Be comfortable sharing stories and sharing your lived experiences.

Love your work

Be enthusiastic. Show genuine energy. Display passion and people will follow you. Remember many of your clients have developed a keen “BS detector” and they can smell it kilometres away.

Have your own act together

A large part of your credibility and your “right to be at the table” is your own being. Look after yourself and present yourself as a professional. Live by our values, surround yourself with great people and give freely of your personality, energy and experience. Be authentic and real.

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