



# Conversion Communication in a Commoditized World

BY SARAH SIMONEAUX

Plan conversion, no matter how we thin-slice it, is a detailed and complex process. Don't underestimate the importance of communication in it.

**F**acebook me," he said, in answer to my question about the best way to reach him. I stared in astonishment. This was not my college sophomore son, but my 80-year-old father. Seeing my wide eyes, he went on: "Look, you know I've never liked talking on the phone. I reserve email for my students, and I keep Facebook open on my iPad so I can chat with my grandchildren. Facebook is the way I like to communicate."

While I was surprised, his answer made sense. As a law professor, he was used to dealing with Millennials and their electronic communication preferences. I had just never thought to ask him about how he wanted me to communicate with him, and it explained why he was slow to return my calls.

How does my octogenarian Gen Y-loving father figure into the retirement services profession? All I had to do to get him to respond to me was to ask how he wanted to

be communicated with. And the answer he gave me was not what I expected. Think about how often that happens in our business: We fire off emails or leave voicemails requesting information, asking detailed questions and delivering complex information without ever asking how our clients want to receive that information.

Takeover plans — which represent a large part of our business these days — are especially vulnerable to communication missteps. Service providers ask for list after list of required items and then hand the plan off to another staff member who may or may not be aware of what has happened in the initial conversion process. It's a recipe for turning a consultative service provider into a commodity. Meaningful communication and teamwork should be at the core of our business, especially when clients first encounter the services staff with their takeover plan.

### First Contact

The first impression of a service firm is the key to winning and keeping clients. Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Blink*, describes how people use “thin-slicing,” or quick first impressions, to form lasting opinions of others. Gladwell profiles Dr. John Gottman of the University of Washington, who is able to predict with 90% accuracy whether or not a couple will stay married for the long term by watching their conversation about a mundane topic — for less than one minute.

Clients and advisors will be forming lasting impressions of services staff in this first minute of communication. Which question would leave a better impression of the company: “We need your signed plan document, last year’s testing reports, this year’s census and your employees’ enrollment forms” or “Before we get involved in your plan’s details, how would you like us to communicate with you?” Listen to the answer and then stick to that communication method. Don’t assume what the

answer might be — remember my Facebook-loving dad’s response to me.

### Troubleshooting

What do you do when you find the requested way of communicating isn’t working? First, apply the “rule of two.” If you have to send two emails about the same topic, pick up the phone. If you have to call a second time, ask when would be a convenient day and time to set up a call.

Second, ask a question rather than reciting a list: “What can we do to help you provide this information?” These tips may be intuitive to salespeople and business owners, but conversion specialists and administrative staff are likely not to have been trained in these important communication techniques.

Regardless of how intuitive or well-trained everyone is in communicating, things will go wrong. Ross Shafer, a keynote speaker a few years ago at The ASPPA 401(k) SUMMIT, points out in the book *The Customer Shouts Back* that 88% of customers would stay with the firm after being badly treated if they felt that their complaints were heard and problems were fixed.

### Foster Communication Skills

Malpractice insurance companies will give premium discounts to doctors who go through communication training. Why? Their research shows the highest probability that a physician will be sued is not for making mistakes, but instead when they have poor relationships with patients and staff. A services firm should foster an environment where employees can face reality and take responsibility without placing blame on others, as well as having the freedom to suggest changes to improve flawed processes and bad customer service.

Knowing how to communicate well with clients and advisors should be a key skill for takeover plan associates. However, these employees are often put in this position because of their attention to detail and their qualified plan knowledge, and they may have limited customer service

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skills. They may also be struggling to balance conversion with a caseload. As a result, curt and rigid client communication is likely to be the first impression of the company. While soft skills training can help break the communication logjam, consider adding a conversion team member with a limited or no caseload who can build relationships among clients, providers and advisors.

Remember that successful communication strategies have these five ingredients:

1. Find out how people want to communicate and stick to that method.
2. Use the “rules of two.”
3. Remember that you are building relationships and not just gathering data.
4. Train everyone on “soft skills.”
5. Make sure you are communicating the values and objectives of the firm.

Effective communication fosters human connections in an increasingly technological and commoditized retirement services world. **▣**



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