

Why your firm needs a Key Client Program

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When I first started working with professional services firms over 25 years ago, a partner pulled me aside and told me that all of his clients were equal. It didn't take me long to realise this was a very bad client strategy to have. Not only are clients not equal, but not all clients are good clients that you want to keep.

So, how can you retain those clients you really, really want to work for while also making your firm an attractive option for new customers with whom you want to grow relationships?

The answer to that question may well lie in implementing a firm-wide Key Client Program (KCP).

What is a Key Client Program?

A KCP is a deliberate strategic initiative utilised by professional services firms to prioritise and manage the relationships they have with their most "important clients".

> **Note:** "important clients" here can have various meanings.

On the one hand, it can be those clients that, if your firm were to lose the account, then you would need to shut up shop. Typically, this would be a client that accounts for more than 50% of your revenue. In that case, make sure you keep them happy!

However, it can also mean strategic growth clients. Examples of this are plenty – Microsoft, Amazon and Uber, for example. Today, all of these are behemoths. But they also all started on dining room tables or in garages at one point!

Tips on how to implement a Key Client Program

To have the best chance of implementing a successful KCP, consider adopting the following plan.

Step 1 - Identify who your key clients are

Define and agree upon the metrics (such as revenue, growth potential, value alignment and strategic importance) that determine what constitutes a “key client”, and then use data to determine who qualifies.

Step 2 – Get senior management buy-in and approval

Once you have identified a list of potential clients for your KCP, take the list to the senior management/executive committee for sign-off on the clients to be included in the program.

Step 3 - Identify who you need to be in the key client team

Once you have an approved list of key clients, do an audit of your internal teams to see who interacts and does the most work with these key clients and invite them to join the program.

Step 4 – Communicate

Once the foundations of the program are in place, communicate this internally, along with the firm’s strategic thinking around the objectives of the program.

Best practices to consider including in a Key Client Program

Every firm is different, but the following are some foundational issues you need to consider when implementing a KCP.

Client needs assessment: Conduct regular interviews/client feedback surveys to understand your client’s ever-moving priorities, challenges, and goals.

Dedicated account team: Offer a specific client account team that includes a Client Relationship Partner (CRP) for issues relating to professional advice and account managers for administrative tasks – such as invoice-related queries.

Account plans: Develop tailored account management plans, including growth strategies, goals, and projected timelines.

Regular check-ins: Schedule quarterly strategic review meetings to discuss progress and opportunities over the next 3-month period.

Competitor analysis: Understand who your client's competitors are so you can provide insights and strategic advice.

Training and education programs: Provide tailored training sessions or resources on relevant topical topics.

Industry insights: Share market trends, research, or benchmarks to help your clients inform their strategies.

Whiteboarding workshops and brainstorming sessions: Organise sessions to address specific challenges or explore opportunities.

Joint innovation initiatives: Collaborate on product or service innovations tailored to their needs.

Exclusive events: Invite key clients to VIP gatherings, such as networking events, dinners, or seminars.

Pro bono projects: Consider collaborating on community initiatives or sustainability projects.

Customised reporting: Provide regular, client-specific performance or progress reports, including establishing service delivery KPIs.

Client portals: Develop a secure platform for sharing documents, reports, and insights with your key clients.

PowerBI: Use data to anticipate client needs and propose solutions proactively.

You'll notice that we have not suggested that you inform the clients themselves that they are part of your firm's KCP.

To be clear here, lots of firms do tell clients they are part of their KCP, and if you think your client is going to enjoy this status, then by all means, tell them.

But, just as the list of Fortune 50 firms of 25 years ago is not the same list of Fortune 50 firms of today, clients on your KCP will change. So, if you tell a client they are on the KCP, you better also prepare a communication telling them why they no longer are. Because odds are, that day will arrive.

At the end of the day, most of the benefits derived from having a KCP are inward-facing.

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