

CPA
Practice Advisor

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Do clients ever tell you they've priced-shopped your services? Do they ever leave with no explanation, maybe because they were price focused? Or are you worried you'll

have to lower your prices or continue to forego increases in order to retain good

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Tommy Spaulding, a *New York Times* best-selling author, executive coach and leadership consultant, recently said during a webinar hosted by Sageworks that to build lifelong, loyal customers, accountants must go beyond niceties and forge personal and professional relationships that invest unselfishly in others.

Spaulding, who is also president of Spaulding Companies Corporation, shared that accountants can not only transform their client relationships but also transform their entire practices by incorporating simple actions that display a desire to help people and to understand their needs.

“In your business ... in the old days, you just had a bunch of accountants who did all of the work in their cubes and their offices, and they never really interacted with their clients,” he said. “They just did the work and submitted the work to the clients, and you had probably business development people or senior partners that were very connected in the community and that would bring in business.”

“There’s not [an accounting] firm in the world that operates that way now,” he added. “Now every CPA, every accountant, every person in the office is in the community, serving on boards, networking, building relationships with your clients and customers, interacting with them, being out of the office and bringing in business.”

Accountants must understand the “power of servant relationships and the power of building relationships that are deeper than just networking,” Spaulding said. These relationships should be based on reliability, credibility and a selfless orientation.

One example of doing this provided a powerful anecdote during Spaulding’s webinar. He recalled a contact at a large accounting firm who learned during a business dinner about Spaulding’s young son’s love of hockey. On the son’s birthday,

the boy received a package containing a thoughtful note from the contact, along

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Asking where someone went to school, for example, where they go on vacation or what they like to do for hobbies is a way to begin a more meaningful conversation and to open a door to sharing a little more about yourself so that the relationship is deeper, Spaulding said.

“Focusing more on the quality vs. the quantity of relationships is where you will see your business grow, and you will be a lot more happy personally,” he said. He recommends that accountants work toward developing five to 10 relationships in which they know the person so well that they can share not only emotions and feelings, but also values and a high degree of openness.

“It’s the little things that we do,” he said. “Really listen to people and how you can serve them. Move away from the traditional birthday, thank you cards, holiday cards. Everybody does that. How can you do special things like this guy did for me?”

Accountants don’t have to be extroverts to put this guidance into practice either, Spaulding said. “These types of relationships can be built by anybody,” he said. It simply takes a willingness to look for opportunities to take relationships that are now “transactional” in nature to a different level.

And it shouldn’t just be partners working on this. Each person needs to find a way to invest himself or herself in the community and to work toward building deep, meaningful relationships with a small group of people, Spaulding recommended.

“Every single person in the firm needs to be an ambassador of building authentic relationships,” he said. “Having just a few people doesn’t build a great culture.”

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