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We are in the business of building relationships. No matter how advanced technology becomes, at the heart of the accounting profession, we are people of *our* people—our clients. That means face-to-face meetings with clients are still (and will likely always be) a mainstay component of a firm's business model. And now well into busy season—the one time of year you can bank on seeing clients in the office—firms need to make the most of “live” time.

Having clients onsite, live and in-person, represents a golden opportunity. Firm partners and staff who have mastered the client meeting understand that a successful meeting is about so much more than providing a rich experience. Of course, you

want clients to feel special and loved, but you also want to use this time to collect

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children's education, to grow their business by 30% and expand into new market spaces? Data offers us far more detailed insight into our clients' lives.

### **The 3 secrets ...**

Data is at the heart of the three secrets that ensure a successful and profitable client meeting. Data is the glue that holds the broader business model together. So, for your next client meeting, consider applying these tested and proven concepts:

- 1. Go in with data collection at the top of your list**—It's all about the data! While you may think you have adequate information on your clients, trust that there is always something you don't know. This is why you should be actively collecting data throughout the year...and definitely during tax season when you are face to face with clients. My best guess is that some firms might have basic data on record, such as the firm services and products the client is using...and maybe even the technologies that support them. (I would also speculate that much of this information is maintained in the heads of key staff and not within a dedicated CRM system.) These are examples of "just-scratching-the-surface" data. After all, what does this information really tell you about a client's wants—their goals and dreams? How can you ever expect to work proactively with clients when you don't have the right data in hand?

In my firm, we run an "Insights" report before we meet with any client. This provides a panoramic view of what we know about the client...and the information gaps that need to be filled. With this knowledge, we go into a meeting with data collection in mind. We not only fill the gaps in data—such as determining if the client is using the current version of QuickBooks or uses our payroll services—but also, do they want more guidance on setting up 529 plans for their kids, do they have an established 401(k) or ROTH IRA, what are their retirement goals, and do they desire deeper tax planning to improve their current situation? This is prime time to ask such open-

ended, exploratory questions as: “What do you really want from us?” and “What are

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the client's life better! For example, if the client is using a credit card for business expenses that is not offering the best rewards, pitch your firm's credit card advisory product. If your client desires to retire by age 55, pitch your retirement planning product that will help reach this goal.

We are accountants and advisors first, but we are also entrepreneurs. Business growth is essential to survival, so make sure you are prepared to talk about the products that can improve a client's life when you meet.

**3. Never go in alone**—This is some of the best advice I received over my 30-plus-year career. For partners, going into a meeting alone can create a few potential challenges, specifically in terms of firm growth and your quality of life. First, going in solo sets the expectation that you are going to do the work because you are the one building the relationship. Second, it puts the onus on you to pass client information along to the staff members who will actually perform the work. This leaves room for error and will drain more of your time. Lastly, going in alone can suck the life out of firm growth because your staff will not feel empowered to take on the responsibility of growing client relationships.

**Start getting to know your clients better ... in order to serve them better**

As a profession, we have an immense opportunity to improve our game. The time has come to move past simply providing a good experience to proactively working to make our clients' lives better. When you understand the importance of data...of getting to know your clients at a much deeper level...you can start to serve them in a proactive manner and, ultimately, witness results that are transformational.

When you take the time to identify and track client goals, to ask more profound questions about their true wants, you can offer far more personalized services that help clients not only achieve their goals but also enrich their lives overall and for the

long-term. Make it your goal to go into your next sit-down armed with these three

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