



Charles A. Maddock

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## On the Edge

By Charles A. Maddock

I'm writing from London on a bright, warm Sunday, the last day in October, the last October of the century. Yesterday I saw the Centennial Dome and the world's largest Ferris wheel. Last night, dinner with an American legal journalist. Today, the British countryside with a friend from another consulting firm. Tomorrow, back to the States. It all seems so easy—not much different than a trip to Pittsburgh or Chicago. And it drives home the point: the interchange of facts, ideas, dollars and deutschmarks, cultures and communications has streamlined the world, facilitating the spread of business, legal and financial services across national boundaries that are becoming less and less important.

Globalization, virtual businesses, e-commerce, brand preferences, the blurring of lines between accountants, lawyers and financial service providers: these are the forces that are shaping our shared and short-term futures. Many law firms will do very well in this environment. Others will lose their essential identity through acquisition, or they will struggle — or they will die. Any law firm that is serious about marketing—not in the next millennium but *now*—must be truly serious about strategic planning. Planning and executing the plan will make the difference.

With so much change anticipated from so many different market vectors, it would be easy to chase in many different directions at once. Marketers and planners need to think creatively, to look for breakthrough solutions (that's why management books are selling better than ever)—but we also need to focus on clients, our key asset. Doing so requires real fundamental client maintenance, principles that are easy to remember and relatively easy to maintain.

To glue clients to the firm and build advantage over competitors:

1. Invest in providing the highest level of service to key clients. Rethink the notion that service means additional cost.
2. Know everything possible about your

clients' businesses. Become part of their trade, industry or professional groups.

3. Set up lines of accountability for service. Institute a Relationship Manager structure similar to that found in banks or advertising agencies. Make Relationship Managers responsible for the entire relationship, including satisfaction and profitability.
4. Regularly ask clients what service is important to them, rather than telling them what the firm has to sell. Benchmark the firm's service against the “best in class” providers in other fields.
5. Find out what obstacles exist to delivering world-class service and break through them.
6. Make a commitment to superior service from the top level of the firm down. Solicit input from every level of the firm. Reward ideas and follow-through.
7. Communicate the firm's vision and expectations to clients, throughout the firm and to every possible referral source.
8. Give good clients what they want, including billing strategies that pay off for both clients and the firm.
9. Fire or refer unproductive clients.
10. Evaluate what works and what doesn't, and continually improve productive service strategies.

Adhering to these basic principles will brand the firm as client and future-focused, a vital asset to have in an era of constant and unexpected change. ♦

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