Getting your cloud proposition right

How to communicate the benefits your practice provides
Understanding what it is we actually do for our clients, why, and how, is at the heart of a firm’s proposition, and key to communicating the benefits we provide.

Generally it’s not something that most firms have needed to consider too frequently, with a steady supply of work around clearly defined sets of services that are understood and bought by our business clients.

Turning our minds to things like:

• Who do we want to do business with and why?
• What do we actually want to deliver for them?
• Where do we deliver real value?
• How do we want to be perceived by others?

These are areas that we rarely revisit, and usually only when there are marketing type conversations being had, for example when we are producing a website or new brochures, or at times of significant strategic review.

But the advent of cloud oriented services is disrupting this, not by drying up work, but by impacting on the relationships we have with clients and the way in which services are delivered. The knock on effect can be significant and also highly disruptive to that clear sense of what we are here to do and for whom.

Those firms that can formulate a robust and coherent sense of their cloud approach are those that stand a better chance of bringing their clients and prospects with them.
How is cloud impacting our proposition?

Cloud services complicate our understanding of our proposition by impacting on:

- Profile of prospect clients
- Services we can offer, what is delivered, and how quickly
- Dynamics of workflow
- What staff do

Fundamentally, the nature of the relationship we have with our clients transforms from understanding yesterday, to looking at today, and eventually thinking more about tomorrow.

It’s no wonder that with these levels of changes the proposition itself has to be reconfigured.

Cultural change - how we think about ourselves evolves too.

The opportunity to work with clients in a different way helps to reinforce a sense that the firm is forward thinking and progressive, and that they understand the benefits of working collaboratively with clients.

However, what we also see is an increased curiosity about how things are done, what further improvements to client systems can be achieved, and what other business challenges they have that can be solved by looking at complimentary systems.

The nature of the work that staff do also changes, as they become freer to get on with the business of helping clients, rather than chasing, inputting and reporting on data.

This curiosity, and a change in engagement by staff as they start to do more rewarding work, can have a profound impact on what we are there to do, and how we go about doing it.

All this sounds great, however if our understanding of what it is we are doing and why is not crystal clear it can cause some challenges, not least to those who buy our services.
A clearly communicated proposition provides a distinct frame of reference for clients and prospects. A lack of clarity and consistency can undermine the strength of your position and make it harder to understand where the real benefits are.

The kinds of client questions you need to be able to answer include:

• How is using this cloud service going to benefit me?
• Should I, or shouldn’t I be considering?
• As my accountant, are YOU clear on the benefits?
• How will using this system change the way we work together for the better?

Your role as their trusted advisor is critical in their thinking.

Being unclear, and not having a coherent proposition will typically make them disinclined to buy, see risk not reward, and ensure that it is not a priority.

This can be reinforced if we end up just selling the benefits of the software, rather than the impact of the overall service itself.

Having a clearly articulated proposition makes the whole package easier to market, easier to buy, and easier to deliver.
Putting the client experience first

It’s easy to think about how we should do something and what we will need to do it, but unless these are anchored in the real needs of our clients, we simply won’t sell anything.

Clients and prospects will only buy things that solves a problem they have. You can’t force people to buy, but you can provide leadership, spot opportunities, and have the ability to create services that meet their evolving needs.

Cloud changes the dynamic of the relationship between clients and their financial administration, as well as them and their accountant. Considering this will help you best communicate, grow out and evolve your approach profitably.

Refining your cloud proposition

By following some straightforward steps you can quite quickly formulate your cloud proposition. It maybe of benefit to do this as an exercise with other partners or managers to round out the view and help to really refine.

1. Define your targets

You are not all things to all men, so pushing out a generic message to all SME businesses may not be useful. Trying to be as precise as possible about who a cloud based service and package of add-ons may benefit will help greatly in identifying the issues they have that you can help with.

Consider aspects such as industry sector, where they are in their business lifecycle, turnover, number of employees, and geographical location. Hone it down to a set of defined client types (or personas) that you know well, and can feel confident talking about. Working out who the service is not for, is just as important as who it is for. Narrowing the field provides focus and elevates the impact on your best prospects.
2. Distill their challenges and how you overcome them

Companies will only buy products and services that meet a challenge they face and pain points they have. Few buy on vanity, and only some will buy on impulse. However most will make purchasing decisions based around specific business needs. For each of your target personas list out their key business challenges, then how a cloud proposition will help them overcome it, and what the outcome will be for them and you.

Consider challenges such as high admin overheads, cash flow, inventory management, and international subsidiaries.

*Establishing real clarity on the way in which you can solve key challenges will open up WHY prospects and clients will take your service seriously.*

3. How will we do it? Characteristics of your proposition

Using this information, map out what the main characteristics of your proposition should be. These will be major headings of your approach rather than service details. For example: generate a new brand, tiered level of service, fixed monthly fees, vendor neutral approach to software selection.

It can be useful to tackle this by finishing the sentence “We will tackle these client challenges by providing a service that will be.....”

It’s important to try and cover as many different angles as possible. You’ll soon work out any that don’t quite fit, or seem inappropriate.

Focussing on these key characteristics sets out HOW you will deliver and solve problems for clients, and is a powerful way to anchor your proposition.
4. What will we do to deliver?
The specifics of the service

Taking each of the characteristics in turn detail out the elements that you believe are essential in being able to provide the service. Another way of thinking about this is to work out what the clients will actually experience.

A useful starting point is to finish the sentence “In order to make X a reality the service will have…”, and finishing with “This will give us….”.

Here you can be as granular as you like. Each of the characteristics can have as many of these specific points as you need.

As an example:

“In order to make fixed monthly fees a reality the service will have well defined tiers of service, software subscriptions included, 12 month contracts, and be payable monthly via Direct Debit.

This will provide a structured transparent service, fully understood by both client and us, and designed to ease cash flow and remove unexpected fees”

*Working through the detail will make it totally clear about WHAT the service needs to comprise in order for it to be a success. This also provides steerage for working out how and who will deliver it internally.*

5. Who will deliver it?

Next look at who will need to be involved. Writing this from all angles can really help in making sure you understand what resource is needed, where there may be skill gaps, who needs to buy into what is going on, and whether you and they have the staff and commitment to fulfill it.

*An important part of your proposition is to ensure that it can be delivered and supported. Understanding the resource requirements can help build up a plan and pathway for staff.*
6. The summary

After working through the above you will have generated great insight as well as detail. The next thing to do is to write out a summary that brings it together in a compact and concise way (250 words or less). It should be written in such a way that can be understood by anyone internally or externally.

Try getting something down quickly and return to it later if need be.

*Distilling your thoughts into something that can be quickly and easily communicated provides the reference point for client, staff and marketing communications.*

Seeing things from your client’s perspective

Seeing things through the eyes of your clients and prospects will help to verify whether your proposition is sound and compelling enough. Working through each of the personas you outlined answer the following questions:

- This is relevant to me because...
- It will deliver....
- The value of it will be to...
- If I don’t consider this then...
- My accountant can recommend this because...

The answers here are essential in working out where the potential gaps are. Don’t be concerned if you also highlight risk, it’s good to uncover them here and tackle them one by one.

By taking the opportunity to work through your proposition from your client’s perspective you can be sure that it will have impact and the highest possible degree of relevance.
When it comes to cloud many firms are making the mistake of choosing software first and then deciding what to do with it after. Not having a clear strategy in place, and not being able to clearly articulate your approach will lead to a piecemeal plan that is difficult to create buy in for, difficult to scale and hard for clients to get their heads around.

Thinking hard about your proposition will help you to create something which is easy to communicate, clear to understand, and easy to buy. It will also help shape any changes that you may need to make to your internal systems.

Focussing and refocusing on a refined list of clients ensures your cloud proposition is honed to meet real business needs and set up for best possible success.

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