

Opinion

You don't know what you don't know

How to use superior knowledge to drive business development.

By **Andrew Hedley**, director, **Hedley Consulting**



FOR MANY firms the term knowledge management has become synonymous with the technical know-how embedded in their core professional skill. It is owned by the professional-support and information-management communities and runs the risk of becoming yet another silo in the multi-compartmentalised structure that afflicts many organisations.

It would be far better to define knowledge management in a more expansive way. After all, when boiled down to its essence, what does a professional-services firm do if not manage knowledge and ideas (in the broadest definition of these words) and develop relationships. Indeed, from a business-development perspective, one of the most interesting areas to explore is the knowledge embedded in client relationships, both individual and systemic, that can be used to shape better ways to build a strong client franchise.

Used correctly, superior knowledge drives better decision making. Better deployment of resources and leveraging of assets creates a strong market proposition, which, in turn, drives profitable growth.

Firms wishing to compete on more than just price must start using ideas to create competitive advantage and install processes and systems that galvanise this sort of activity within their organisations. Some of these ideas will centre on their core technical skills, but many more will innovate in the areas of service, delivery, pricing and relationship management.

Understanding what clients want today, the things they will desire in future, and how competitors are shaping their services, are insights every marketer should seek relentlessly. Sophisticated clients recognise the value that can be generated through partnering with their professional advisors; the advantages that flow from such collaborations are well documented and smart firms will use these incubators to generate insights and approaches that produce much wider benefits across their general client base. They produce a competitive context within which a firm can shape its own plans; always looking to increase value-added in the areas most important to the client through innovation and new product development.

Of course, there also needs to be an effective filter. Commercial testing of innovative ideas is crucial to ensure limited resources are used to best effect. Choosing which horses to back and which to put out to pasture is a key competency in organisations that are innovation-led. They need to ensure they go to market on a basis that is both attractive to clients, and commercially viable for themselves.

Many firms aspire to be seen as thought leaders in their field. However, a recent research project, White Space 2007, published by Arkimeda, found that the reality of thought-leadership programmes lagged far behind this objective.

It is axiomatic that there can only be one thought leader in a particular subject field. This fact seems to have been overlooked in a world where firms make simultaneous claims to be leading the thinking in their particular industry, practice area, sector or service line.

Indeed, for many organisations it is clear that the badge of thought leadership is no more than a superficial label applied to thinly veiled sales and promotional materials. According to the findings of White Space 2007, the websites of the world's 40 largest consulting firms carry an incredible 3,500 articles, reports, white papers and books that claim to be genuine thought-leadership pieces. This is quite aside from the many thousands of promotional brochures and flyers more overtly in the vein of mainstream marketing communications materials. The research found that good thought leadership, while inevitably having a commercial purpose for the organisation that produces it, displays four characteristics:

- It is relevant and practical;
- It is backed up by thorough research;
- It says something different or new;
- It does not try too hard to sell the services of the firm that produced it.

Using these as a scorecard against which to rigorously assess the material produced by your firm provides insight as to the amount of genuine innovation. This needs to be contrasted with efforts that are directed at 'me too' communications seeking to grab a share of awareness in a hugely over-communicated marketplace.

Firms that are able to redefine their perspective on knowledge have taken the first step in a new approach to developing products and services through inclusive and expansive thinking. The alignment of marketing and knowledge assets will ensure great ideas receive commercial attention and are communicated effectively.

To be successful, put in place structures that link the 'idea factories' across your business. Create accelerator programmes to take the very best concepts to market and ensure rigour in pursuing excellence. Finding ways to unlock the full potential of your knowledge capital will create better value for your clients and increased opportunities for your firm. ■

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