

# DEEP

# IMPACT

By Alison MacAlpine

**DIG TO THE CORE OF CLIENT VALUES AND COME UP WITH A ROCK-SOLID RELATIONSHIP.**

**A**dvisors often cite “deeper client relationships” as one of the chief benefits of streamlining. But once they’ve taken the plunge and pared down their portfolios, what exactly constitutes a strong advisor/client relationship? And how do successful advisors go about intensifying those connections?

The consensus is it’s achieved by offering tailor-made levels of service inspired by a solid understanding of what makes specific clients tick. In addition to that, advisors concur the foundation for deep client relationships is trust.

Bev Moir, a financial planner with Toronto-based ScotiaMcLeod, builds trust by putting clients at ease. She does



this by revealing her own vulnerabilities. “I have to show myself to be human,” she explains. “There are times that I share information of a personal nature with clients—especially early in the relationship when they’re having to get financially undressed and may be uncomfortable exposing themselves.”

Later on, Moir looks for opportunities to learn from her clients, particularly in their own areas of expertise, which may be something as basic as child-rearing. She also believes relationships are enhanced when the teaching goes both ways.

One advisor coach recommends building trusting relationships by asking clients open-ended questions and allowing them to respond, rather than dominating the conversation. According to Steve Hemphill, partner of Advisor Pathways, a consulting firm in Oakville, Ont., the benefits for those who listen well, and take good notes, are compelling: “You’re going to get a higher share of wallet. You’re going to get more referrals. And you’re going to get higher client loyalty.”

Dave Pickett, who heads up Practice Management at TD Waterhouse Private Investment Advice in Toronto, stresses the importance of a related skill: tuning your radar. “You have to move away from the traditional financial planning questions and start to ask personal questions,” he says, adding that while the core of the advisor/client relationship is investment performance, building intimacy with clients is still the key to solidifying lasting relationships.

Interestingly, although many advisors agree in principle about what constitutes a deep client relationship,

as well as the importance of building trust, the strategies they adopt to bring clients closer are as unique as their practices.

## Financial Advisor as GUIDANCE COUNSELLOR

Bea Grant remembers how proud she was when she learned that a funding organization awarded one of her client’s children the top scholarship to attend university. She was proud as she knew she’d played an important role in this student’s success.

Grant, a CFP with Dundee Wealth Management in South Surrey/White Rock, B.C., regularly coaches her clients and their children through the application process for scholarships and bursaries. “We try to do a lot of little things that really make the difference,” she explains. “By talking with people over a period of years, you get to know things. You can’t just sit down with them once and know your client. You’ve got to listen—that’s key.”

Listening prompted Grant to remind her client’s son that some of his community activities could complement the good marks on his application. She pointed out the time he spent talking to residents and volunteering to call out bingo numbers while visiting his grandmother in a nursing home during the last year of her life. She recalled he had become heavily involved with a local political party and attended a leadership convention. And she remembered he had delivered CDs to children in hospital when his brother was sick—at which time his family chimed in that they had received a thank-you letter from the hospital. She recommended

the son include a copy of the letter with the scholarship application.

Grant acknowledges her practice of working with families (including different generations of families) has paid off. “It’s long-lasting relationships that you’re forming, and they grow over time if you genuinely care,” she says.

## Financial Advisor as LIFE COACH

David Bluteau and his partner, Michael DeVenney, both hold coaching designations that give them a competitive edge in relationship building. Bluteau, a CFP, investment advisor and vice-president of Wellington West Capital in Halifax, explains, “Retirement planning is a huge topic that deals with a lot of things that I view as more important than money. What are you going to do throughout retirement? What are your goals? One of the beliefs that we have is you always have to have a future that’s bigger than your past.”

Bluteau teaches his clients about strategies that have helped others make smooth transitions into retirement. For example, he says not all clients want to go cold turkey and stop working. Rather, clients who have successfully transitioned into retirement have replaced time spent working with other meaningful activities.

“Working and having a sense of purpose has always been important for clients,” he explains. “It’s probably always better to phase it in and come up with new activities, new interests and new goals to replace the work parts of their lives. But if you’re going to try and replace 40 hours a week of work, what

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are you going to substitute?” Bluteau says that “purpose” comes down to more than just golfing and leisurely activities. The client may opt for something as simple as volunteering.

He then offers clients financial planning tips that dovetail with their life goals. “Financial planning is a small piece of the puzzle,” he says. “A lot of our clients want things handled for them. So it’s making sure that their investments meet their objectives, their requirements for income, and that money is set aside if something’s important for them, such as taking a trip, or going to do some volunteer work.”

The result is a rock-solid practice where the average client has been with him for eight to 10 years. Bluteau credits his strength in relationship building as the key strategy accounting for that longevity. He recalls a time a client came to him after leaving a financial planning competitor. The client was seeking greater overall advice. Although the competition did a first-rate job of account management, Bluteau thinks the client switched sides primarily because he was looking for that relationship factor.



BEA GRANT

CFP  
DUNDEE WEALTH  
MANAGEMENT  
South Surrey/  
White Rock, B.C.

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“There was no question the investment advice this individual was receiving was excellent. What he was not receiving was the relationship and also the overall financial planning,” acknowledges Bluteau.

One client used the term “professional friend” to describe his relationship with Bluteau because the advisor often meets with clients socially for lunch and accepts invitations to dinner at their homes. And on more than one occasion, he has even sat with clients at their deathbeds.

## Financial Advisor as CAR BROKER

CFP Vera Adamovich understands cars. Her husband is self-employed in a field related to the automobile industry, so Adamovich, an advisor with Laurentian Financial Services in Ottawa, has an “ear-to-the-ground” sense of the most reliable, cost-effective automobiles. When one couple—both clients—called to arrange to take money out of their short-term savings to purchase a new vehicle, she found herself taking


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on the role of car broker. In the past, the couple had complained long and loud about a series of cars they had bought from their brother-in-law.

This time, when they announced they were about to purchase an updated model of exactly the same make, Adamovich decided to step in. She called around town and visited two dealerships to negotiate the best price on a type of car she herself had owned in the past. Then she made an appointment with one dealer for 10 a.m. on a Saturday, picked up her clients and accompanied them on their test drive.

"They loved it. They bought it. The dealer offered me a job!" Adamovich laughs. "Every time I've seen them since then, they give me a hug and say, 'What would we have done if we didn't have you?'"

Now, when clients ask for advice in the car-buying arena, Adamovich offers recommendations and referrals to specific, well-regarded dealerships in the community.

## WHITTLE WITHOUT WORRY

*Your creativity with clients will surge when you free up your time.*

When's the right time to go deeper with clients?

**W**hen's the right time to go deeper with clients? The correct answer is: ALWAYS. But sometimes, especially when you're dealing with an overload of clients, it's just not possible to reach every Bob and Mary in your book. Many experienced advisors concur it's necessary to focus attention on clients who are a good fit so they have time to go the extra mile and develop deep relationships. Scott Plaskett says he's cut down his practice to target only clients who are motivated to get involved in a comprehensive financial planning process. The senior financial planner and CEO of IRONSHIELD Financial Planning in Toronto, also looks for ways to enhance efficiencies within his practice. "We've tried to systematize everything that's predictable, everything that we can control. That frees up myself and my staff to recognize areas where we can do unique things for clients," says Plaskett.

Streamlining was, to some extent, imposed on Bea Grant when she moved her practice from Ontario to British Columbia in 1992. She left all but 15 families behind, and then carefully replenished her numbers in South Surrey/White Rock. Now, in addition to providing financial guidance to 150 B.C. households (and helping them to win scholarships), she personally visits a controlled cluster of 55 Ottawa families several times a year. She emphasizes: "I'm always very, very cautious that I don't take on more than I can do. You don't want people to be neglected."

—A.M.

(For more on streamlining, see "Less is more," *Advisor's Edge*, Jan. 2005, page 22)

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## Financial Advisor as COI

Sandra McLeod, CFP, chartered accountant and director of estates and trusts at Grant Thornton LLP in Toronto, makes a point of building a large network of contacts, including centres of influence (COIs) for clients. She looks for opportunities to connect her clients with resources they might need—from traditional lawyers and accountants, to marriage counsellors, career counsellors, and even professionals in the sporting and car businesses.

For example, she tries to introduce unemployed clients to contacts who can help them with new prospects. Or, if a client's child is in trouble, she recommends appropriate community resources. Essentially she becomes her client's primary COI. "I'm interested in getting to know them—even if it's not specifically related to their finances or their taxes," McLeod says. "You're building a long-term relationship and you want them to know that you're prepared to go above and beyond. When they know that, they know you're going to be there for them when they need the other things."

When advisors perform leap-and-bound-like feats for their clients—those friendship-deepening aspects between the advisor and client—it's not a question of learning where to draw the line between being the consummate financial professional and getting to know clients better, McLeod adds. "I guess I don't look at it that way," she concedes. "You oftentimes get to be very good friends with your clients. So the way you draw the line is when you're doing business—whether it's directly related to the tax or estate planning or something peripheral—you do it in a business environment and on a very professional level. Let's say you're out for dinner with them or at a social event—you deal with them as you would any other friend. You don't talk business."

Like Bluteau, McLeod believes an ideal client relationship extends beyond the business platform. "Get to know clients," she urges. "Become genuinely interested in them. And if you're not genuinely interested in them—and it can happen where you just don't click with somebody—then find another

advisor they do click with. They will remember that you were looking out for their best interests." **AE**

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