



Client Focus vs. [Client Focus Lite](#)

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Do you remember the TV ad that showed a young man proposing to his beloved—by use of a powerpoint slide deck extolling his virtues?

Did you ever work for someone who asked his (rarely her) secretary to remind him of his wife’s favorite flowers, and the occasions on which they should be sent?

Did you ever learn something—then learn it again, as if for the first time, because you were going to have to teach it to someone else?

Then you have some sense of the difference between true client focus, and client focus Lite.

We all know what’s going on when we receive a “customized” letter with another person’s name in our place. We all know what’s going on when a retail sales clerk says, “I’ve got just the right thing for you” after meeting us for 30 seconds.



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But the B2B world—and particularly the professional services world—is loaded with tempting come-ons and how-to’s about client focus. Beware. You are often buying CFL (Client Focus Lite), not CFR—Client Relationship Right. Worse yet, you may be passing it on in your own business development and client relationships practices.

This article describes the difference between CFL and CFR, and some practical suggestions about how to make sure you’re doing the latter.

CLIENT FOCUS LITE VS. CLIENT FOCUS RIGHT

With a nod to Jeff Foxworthy, here are some indicators that you may be practicing CFL (Client Focus Lite).

If your client focus is built into a business process model—*you might be a CFL user.*

If your client focus ends at “needs identification”—never touching the “wants” below the surface of the “needs”—*you might be a CFL user.*

If your client focus is systematically linked to your company’s ROI, quarterly earnings, and your bonus—*you might be a CFL user.*

If your client focus is a synonym for lead screening—*you might be a CFL user.*

If your client focus is built around client political power maps—*you might be a CFL user.*

If your client focus is built around key phrases to advance the sales call—*you might be a CFL user.*

The difference between Client Focus Right and Client Focus Lite boils down to two things: intent and empathy. Let’s look at each.

Intent. If your intent boils down to nothing more than self-aggrandizement, then any client will see through it. If your purpose in being client-focused is mainly about getting the sale, then you have made your clients into objects for your own goals. Means to your own ends. Chips in your own little poker game.

If, on the other hand, you actually care—even just a bit, once in a while—it comes through. None of us are saints when it comes to intent; and no one expects us to be. We all

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have a healthy dose of ambition and ego, and to some extent that's what drives business. When it comes to intent, a little difference makes all the difference.

There is a difference. You know perfectly well when someone is trying to get out from under the tyranny of their own set of objectives, and genuinely trying to help

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you. And you know equally well when someone has no intention of doing so—when they're mailing it in, checking the boxes, and trying to process you as quickly possible to convert you to a sale or a reject; a win or a loss; a notch in the belt, or a piece

of history.

Empathy. Here is Wikipedia's entry for empathy:

Empathy (from the Greek εμπαθεια, transliterated as empathia, meaning "physical affection, partiality") is commonly defined as feeling or expressing emotion for another. Since the states of mind, beliefs, and desires of others are intertwined with their emotions, one with empathy for

another may often be able to more effectively define another's mode of thought and mood. Empathy is often characterized as the ability to "put oneself into another's shoes", or to in some way experience the outlook or emotions of another being within oneself, a sort of emotional resonance.

Not your everyday business reading. But perhaps it should be. The dominant thinking in business tends to cast empathy as vaguely wussy, or insufficiently tough. That's unfortunate, because the toughest investment banker, oil tycoon or white-shoe lawyer wants to do business with someone they feel "gets" who they are. And that's all empathy is: "getting" someone on a deep level.

Defining client "needs" is not the same thing. Client "needs" are things like asynchronous communications capability, real-time general ledger closing, or integrated management reporting. Empathy, however, deals in emotions: frustration, excitement, propriety, nervousness, delight.

We reflect agreement on needs through statements, proposals, contracts. We reflect



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agreement on emotions through empathy—from “I know how you feel” to “damn, that’s tough,” to “wink wink nod nod.”

If you’re just doing client needs, you’re doing Client Focus Lite. Add intent and empathy, and you get Client Focus Right.

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MAKING IT WORK

Here are 4 tips to moving from CFL to CFR.

- Brainstorm. Not client needs—client worldview. Get a few folks around the table and have an unstructured conversation about what it must be like to work in that organization, and what it must be like to be the person in question.
- Ask 5 levels of “what’s behind that?” Let needs definition be a starting point. Begin with, “they really need integrated management reporting,” and ask, “what’s behind that?” Pursue it until you get to answers like, “that’s what the CEO is screaming about,” or “that’s how she sees getting ahead.”

- Make a list of 27 questions. Some can be pure business (“who does he report to?”). Others ought to be more personal (“where did she grow up?”) and still more aimed at empathy (“what makes him really excited? Upset?”). You’ll decide whether and how to ask these questions; the main purpose is in thinking about them.

- Role-Play. About the closest we can get to “walking in someone else’s shoes” is to pretend we are them, in some realistic context. You probably feel more uncomfortable doing this than doing any other suggestion. But nothing is more powerful. Try it; it works.

Remember the original Lite beer campaign? In a faux competition against “regular” beer, Lite’s battle cry was “less filling.” If someone asked your clients about your degree of client focus, would they say your client focus “tastes great?” Or that it’s “less filling?”

In the beer business, sometimes less is more. But when it comes to client focus, more is more. And the more it’s about you, the more it’s Client Focus Lite. To be Client Focus Right, it really has to be about them.

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