

# Keeping It Real

A transcript of a conversation with Nate Bennett, author and professor at Georgia State University's Robinson College of Business.

**ORIGINAL**

# Introduction

Nate Bennett is original. He speaks with a clarity that inspires credibility and trust. In other words, he's authentic.

The following is a transcript of excerpts from a phone conversation between Nate and one of my colleagues, Jacob Parks, with narration by Dave Bayless. The transcript highlights some of the themes that Doug Fletcher and I explore in depth in our book, *How Clients Buy*, including trust and the nature of authenticity.

In addition, Nate expounds on the value of client-specific skills, high-impact mentoring and the roles we necessarily play as professionals. As I note in my companion blog post, Nate argues that authenticity come with a price - one worth paying.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom". The letters are stylized and cursive.

Tom McMakin, Co-author of *How Clients Buy* and CEO of Profitable Ideas Exchange

# About Nate Bennett

Nate is a student and practitioner of professional services.



Nate Bennett is Associate Dean and Professor at the Robinson College of Business, Georgia State University. He is also the founder of two management consulting firms: Red Buoy Consulting and Reperio Partners. Nate holds degrees from Tulane University and the Scheller College of Business at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

# Transcript

Here's the transcript of the podcast accompaniment to Tom McMakin's blog post, [Keeping It Real: Why Clients Value Authenticity](#), featuring Nate Bennett. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Dave Bayless: Jacob Parks of Profitable Ideas Exchange spoke with Nate Bennett, an author and a business professor at Georgia State University. This episode consists of highlights of their wide-ranging conversation in which Nate discussed the nature of authenticity, trust, client-specific skills, and mentoring. Nate started by challenging the notion that authenticity is some form of radical, uncompromising transparency.

Nate Bennett: When people say authenticity, part of what they're talking about is transparency. You know: what you see is what you get. We don't really want leaders to do that. In fact, if I am a shareholder and the CEO is authentic [in that sense], I'm selling [my shares]. Authenticity would mean going to people and saying, "Yeah, the company's about to go in the shitter. The ship is sinking. Man the lifeboats." That would be the authentic [completely transparent] thing to do. [Maybe] people just don't understand what authentic means.

Dave: As an alternative, Nate shared his perspective on what might be considered true authenticity in the context of professional services. In his words, "Authenticity is not showing off."

Nate: My sophomore year in high school, even though we lived in a town with very good public schools, my parents and I decided it would be smart for me to go to a boarding school. So my mom picked me up from school and we drove to New Hampshire - where Phillips Exeter is - for my interview.

I was wearing jeans, a polo shirt, and a sweater or something like that. On the way, we were low on gas so we had to stop. I figured I would help my mom out by

pumping the gas. Because I was new at it, I didn't handle the topping off very well. So, there was some splash-back, and I got some gas on me. I did what I could [to clean up] with paper towels, but I smelled a little bit like gas. I got back in the car, and we drove the rest of the way to the interview.

As I was speaking with the admissions counselor, he looks at me and says, "Why are you dressed that way?" It took a minute for me to understand what he was getting at with the question. As I was figuring it out, he said, "Didn't you [know we] wear a coat and tie to class?" I said, "I came from school, and so I'm dressed for the way I go to [my current] school. If I come to school here, I would dress for school here."

I don't remember exactly how he brought up my odor, but we got on the topic of my smelling like gas. I explained, "Well, we needed gas, and I thought I should help my mom, so I pumped the gas, and I got some on me. I washed up the best I could, and here I am."

It actually seemed like he was more interested in me after those stories and those answers. I think he started to see me as an individual who might have things to say, and the course of the conversation changed. I got in, and that's where I went, and I actually wore a coat and tie to class just like they expected me to.

Everybody who applies at Exeter is reasonably smart, and everybody who sells professional services is reasonably smart. So what is it you can do that makes the story - the conversation - interesting, instead of just showing off? Thinking about authenticity is that it's not showing off.

Dave: Closely related to the topic of authenticity is trust.

Nate: Trust has three components: ability, integrity, and benevolence. So when those three things are present, you trust. I would argue that you'd have to be able to sell on all three of those [components] in order to get a potential client to feel like they really want to enter into a relationship with you.

Dave: One way to cultivate trustworthiness is to demonstrate ability. To Nate, that suggests developing client-specific skills.

Nate: Way back in graduate school I learned about the distinction between easily transferable skills and firm-specific skills. When it comes to selling professional services, it's almost like you want to talk about a third category, which is client-specific skills.

Now, I would imagine that in professional services there are lots of instances where a company will go to, [first instance], Ford Motor Company and say, "You need to hire us rather than the other guys because we've got a bunch of people that are mechanical engineers, have auto industry experience, and drive cars, so we have client-specific skills."

Dave: Nate also shared his thoughts on what he calls "high-impact mentoring".

Nate: The thing with mentoring is that there are lots of what I would consider low-impact mentorship relationships out there, low-impact mentorship programs. What's needed, and I think what was originally intended by mentorship, is something that's high-impact. A mentor is somebody who invests an incredible amount of time and energy in you. It's not somebody with whom you have coffee once a quarter.

I think the challenge with mentoring is to make sure that it has the intensity that's necessary to help the mentee accomplish their goals. Ph.D. programs are a lot more like what mentoring is intended to convey. That's where I spent between 20 and 60 hours a week for 5 years working under somebody to understand what was involved in being a decent college professor. That's high-impact mentoring.

Obviously, in today's organizational setting, there isn't the slack to create that kind of relationship, but it needs to be a heck of a lot closer to that than it does to, you know, we're connected on LinkedIn, and I buy you an occasional coffee.

Dave: Finally, Nate shared some advice for those starting their professional services careers.

Nate: There are two metaphors that come to mind, and they're maybe a little bit redundant. Sometimes I feel like everything we do in business is like dating. I mean, you're just constantly trying to have your best-self present, to be engaging, to be interesting, and to merit somebody's further attention. It just constantly feels like

being on a date.

The other [metaphor] is the Shakespearean, "All the world's a stage." I mean, you are playing a professional part. Your job in your profession is to play a part, and you've got to remember that and understand the character and what the character's motivation is and how to stay in character. You're only believable if you're consistently in character. We accept people playing a character and, we understand that the way somebody acts in church is going to be different than the way somebody acts at a bachelor party and is going to be different than the way somebody acts in a corporate boardroom.



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