

Why We Wrote "How Clients Buy"

A transcript of an interview of Tom McMakin and Doug Fletcher, co-authors of *How Clients Buy: A Practical Guide to Business Development for Consulting and Professional Services*.



Introduction

I'm one of those consultants who wince a bit when I hear the word selling. But, I feel compelled to help business owners achieve their goals, and I need to make a living. I find Tom and Doug's approach to business development liberating.

In this first of a series of interviews, Andi Baldwin of Profitable Ideas Exchange asked *How Clients Buy* co-authors Tom McMakin and Doug Fletcher to explain the premise of the book and why they were compelled to write it. Here's my summation of their answers:

- Your professional advancement depends on demonstrating your capacity to develop new business.
- The professional services and consulting sectors are large and growing. At the same time, competition is heating up.
- Even so, most of us never receive formal sales training. To a significant degree that's due to an undercurrent of antipathy towards our perception of sales as being manipulative and coercive.
- Most books on sales focus on the seller and the art of persuasion.
- Tom and Doug flip the camera and focus on the process clients go through when buying professional services.

The result of this empathetic approach is a better understanding of how to cultivate the conditions necessary for a prospect to engage your services.



Dave Bayless, Co-founder of Human Scale Business

About the Authors

Tom McMakin and Doug Fletcher are practicing consultants who live the challenges addressed in their book.



Tom is CEO of Profitable Ideas Exchange (PIE), a leading provider of business development services for consulting and professional services firms. Previously, he held leadership positions in private equity and served as the chief operating officer of Great Harvest Bread Co, a multi-unit operator of bread stores. Tom is the author of *Bread and Butter*, a critically-acclaimed book that describes his work at Great Harvest and how he and his team created a nationally recognized corporate learning community and culture of best practices using collaborative networks. He has appeared on the pages of *Fast Company*, *Inc Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *Business Week*, and *The Wall Street Journal* and speaks widely. He is a graduate of Oberlin College and former Peace Corps Volunteer in Cameroon.



Doug currently splits his time between speaking/writing/coaching on the topic of business development in consulting and professional services and teaching at the Jake Jobs College of Business & Entrepreneurship at Montana State University. He also serves on the Board of Directors of The Beacon Group, a growth strategy consulting firm headquartered in Portland, Maine. Prior to that, he was co-founder and CEO of North Star Consulting Group, a technology-enabled consulting firm that specialized in global web-survey projects. Earlier in his professional life, Doug served as a consultant with the management consultancy, A.T. Kearney, and was trained at General Electric in its leadership development program. He is a graduate of Clemson University and has an MBA from the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business Administration.

Transcript

Andi Baldwin: So we're sitting here today with Tom McMakin and Doug Fletcher, authors of the recent book *How Clients Buy*. Doug, I'm wondering if you could tell us about the premise of the book and why you felt like it had to be written today.

Doug Fletcher: In the book, we analyze two interesting problems that many of us face in consulting and the professional services. The first of these problems is that in order to become a partner in most medium to large firms, you have to demonstrate that you can become a rainmaker and that you can win new business; you can bring clients' work into the firm.

And the second part of this problem is that nowhere along the way are we ever taught how to do this. So it's something we have to do, and we're not taught how to do it. So we felt like it was a topic that was relevant. There are almost six million Americans today that are practicing some profession or some type of consulting. So it affects a lot of people.

As to why we felt like the time was right to examine this now is that this particular segment of the economy is exploding. It's growing at five times the rate of the overall economy. So it's affecting more and more people's careers. We felt like it was a topic that needed to be studied further.

Andi: Compared to other business topics, there are remarkably few books written about selling professional services. Tom, why do you think this is?

Tom McMakin: You know, I think in professional services, you are the product. And it feels like you're bragging if you sell. We have an adverse reaction to the idea of selling. It kind of connotes the used car salesman. I don't think there have been a lot of books that have focused on how business development works inside of professional services.

Doug was saying we don't learn it. We learn how to do our profession. We learn how to be an attorney. We learn how to be an architect. We learn how to be an accountant. But we don't learn how to represent that to the world. If you go to business schools and you scan the course curriculum, you might see something on marketing management. But you're not going to see, "How do you sit down with somebody that you could serve with your expertise and scope work off of that conversation?"

I think the last thing is we have to remember in professional services, particularly accounting and law, it was flat illegal to market yourself. For many years and through the '70s, a lawyer wasn't allowed to carry a business card. The phenomenon of lawyers advertising on the freeway, the Long Island Expressway, is a somewhat new phenomenon. Because before the '70s, it was not thought to be appropriate to the professional services. And as a consequence, if you Google the word leadership, for example, leadership books, you're going to see 200,000 entrants. But if you Google selling professional services, you're going to see a dozen or so.

Andi: Out of that handful or dozen of books that have actually been written about selling professional services, Doug, what would you say makes this book different?

Doug: We took a very unique approach in writing our book. As Tom mentioned, there's not very many books written about the topic of selling professional services or business development and consulting. [You can] probably count on one, maybe two hands, the number of books out there. And there are some good books, for example, books by Ford Harding or David Maister and others.

But most of the sales literature has to do with tips and techniques, things that we can do to become more persuasive. How can we become better at selling? And that rubbed us wrong in many ways, because I think that that gets at the core of why professionals resist this whole notion of becoming salespeople. It feels manipulative, right?

So what we decided to do was we turned the camera from ourselves onto the client. And we asked ourselves, how does a client buy, right? Rather than how do I sell, how does a client buy? It's a subtle but important shift in that it causes us to think about things from the client's point of view.

Furthermore, we used a technique that we borrowed from the creative world, from designers, a technique called design thinking. And with design thinking, it's basically an approach where you start with empathy for the end user and look at things through their lives. So in our book, that was our approach.

And throughout the entire book, we look at things through the lens of the client and, more specifically, the client's buying journey-- their decision-making journey and how they go about hiring professionals. So we try to look at how we can help the client make a good decision rather than trying to do something manipulative that would cause them to do something that they wouldn't otherwise do.



HOW CLIENTS BUY

The Real-World Guide to Selling Professional Services

A survival guide for every service professional, this book helps you up your game by schooling you in the secrets of finding, connecting with, and build lasting professional relationships with the clients you want and deserve.

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