


## *Make Your Client a CPF*

 As a young account supe a couple of decades ago I remember it seemed like our CEO at Ketchum did nothing but play golf or go to ball games and dinner with the CEOs of our clients Westinghouse, ALCOA, H.J. Heinz, PPG, etc. What a life, I thought - to be paid all that money to schmooze, play golf, and have a cold one on the 19th during business hours! All while we lackeys sweated in windowless offices to get estimates approved or minor copy changes made.

Until one day there was a significant crisis involving a potential conflict of interest. We were about to lose one of our largest blue-chip accounts (and my job likely would have gone, too) when the agency's Big Guy came down the hall and announced to our account group that he'd worked things out with his close personal friend, the client CEO. Everything was fixed with a phone call.

As the years went by and more senior positions came along, a couple of things became clear. First, no matter how diligently you worked or how good the work itself was, in this business things get badly sideways for reasons beyond your control. Second, these pickles are best resolved by the top people - the agency president relying on the friendship and trust developed over time with his or her client counterpart.

I call it making your client a CPF - a Close Personal Friend.

Sounds a little unctuous, I suppose, until you remember that business at its core is all about relationships. . . and it's easier to do business with a friend. Because with friends you forgive the occasional bumps and navigate the rough patches knowing that your friendship and mutual trust developed over the years will pull you both through.

It also helps to remember that clients are not just tools or a means to an end. They're people with families, issues, interest and hobbies, problems, trying to do the best job they can - and they deserve friendship. Some of my closest lifelong friends were once clients - our friendships have lasted way beyond mere business deals.

Agency/client relationships last longest and work best when they're fastened firmly at the top because everything else below, on both sides, is just too fragile. People come and go, reporting structures change. The place to attach and snug up the anchor bolts is where things are least likely to shift: at the top.

Don't be like an agency owner we know who refuses to "get his hands dirty" by spending time with senior client people. He's uninvolved, preferring to have his minions do that messy client stuff. That's a mistake and in fact he's on the way to tough times because his clients told us (through our Client Survey program) that shunning them will soon have negative consequences.


Look, it's not all about the schmoozing, that's for sure. The agency should be held accountable for tangible outcomes and ROI, especially these days when every expenditure must be justified. Performance and measurable results are table stakes and they're in first place in any client/agency relationship.

But if you're an agency principal, it's in your interest to make all your clients CPFs.

Hey, it's scary out there. We need all the friends (and clients) we can get, right?

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For more ideas about better client/agency relationships, see the article archive on our website where you'll find a whole section about client relations.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joe Grant". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.