



From an Information Search Firm: Five Insights

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Abstract: Discusses some principles of managing an information search firm and their similarities to managing corporate libraries. Compares information search firms to other professional service firms. Describes the evolution of one small business and science information search firm. Gives insights into managing customer service and client relationships, quality control and processes, risk taking and professional growth. Touches on David Maister's theory of the quality experience and Michael Gerber's idea of the role of the entrepreneur vs. the technician in small start-up businesses.

I believe that there is really not so much that is fundamentally unique about running an information services firm. As with any professional services firm – think of accountants and architects and attorneys – we have to satisfy clients, reward staff, pay bills, and, if we are lucky, make a profit. In my own quest to satisfy clients and pay employees, I pick up lessons wherever I can find them. But my roots are in the traditional library world, and so the organizational model that dominates my thinking is that of the business library or information center.

For me and most of my colleagues at Threshold Information, our base knowledge of doing research and how a research organization is organized is derived from earlier experiences in libraries. The lessons about customer service and the research process that we learned in school and while working in larger corporate and academic settings served as guides in the early years of building this from-scratch business research firm. This article recycles some basic customer service and process principles that the reader will be familiar with, but presents them as they have been mutated and colored by application to a multi-client, for-profit information service.

By way of background, Threshold Information is a search firm of about a dozen employees and a network of associates that grew out of a freelance information practice I established in 1993. Market opportunities and the unexpected appeal of managing a business led me to hire employees and continue to evolve a business and science information search firm with

multiple project streams, an office with employees to pay and benefits to administer, computer servers and phone systems and the many other trappings of a small enterprise. The firm serves the information needs of corporations, both small and large. Our services are frequently, but not exclusively, delivered through corporate libraries.

In *Business Information Review* 24(4), Oriole Newgass presented an excellent review of some of the essential first steps in setting up a solo information consultancy. The present article may complement the Newgass article to a degree, but it is not a roadmap for expanding beyond the solo operation.

The five bullets below express in short form some of the ideas that we at Threshold use as guideposts for day-to-day decision-making. These ideas direct our relations with existing clients, govern our first encounters with new clients, and generally inform our decisions about how things are done here. Each insight or principle could be the base of a discussion thread with many implications and spin-off ideas. This article exposes some of these strands to view, and we hope provokes some helpful reflection in the reader on his or her own organization.

- Solve the quality equation
- Each client is your only client
- Never say no
- Processes are (almost) as important as people
- Don't let your attention wander

Insight #1: Solve the quality equation

Any information search firm in a western country, with our relatively high labor rates, has to provide services at a level of quality that unambiguously distinguishes it from suppliers in low labor cost countries that provide apparently similar services. Even if we take the offshoring phenomenon out of the picture, consistent and ever-improving quality is a critical success factor; even the most loyal client will from time to time test the waters looking for a better resource. Clients always have options. Our ability to stay in business depends on our ability to sustain a superior quality service.

What do clients perceive as quality? We have not conducted focus groups or research studies to determine what the answer to that question is for our clients. But I believe that the answer is not far different from what determines quality in any service business, whether consumer oriented or business-to-business.

David Maister is a consultant to consulting firms. His classic Managing the Professional Services Firm has lots to teach all of us in the research world, whether solos or corporate information center managers. [1] In it he writes about the two aspects of quality for a professional services firm: the quality of the work and the quality of the service. The two factors sum up to the 'quality of the experience.'

The quality of the experience =
quality of service + quality of work.

How does one manage for superior quality in the client experience? What processes guarantee quality when so much of what we do is the never-duplicating, measurement-defying product of intense intellectual effort by individuals working mostly alone?

Achieving consistent 'quality of work' is relatively easy. Research professionals are like most other professionals in any industry. Personal pride in their work drives them to deliver the highest quality research results they are capable of, within the limitations and parameters of the particular jobs. At Threshold we have a very stable core staff and a relatively stable associate staff. We have a program of continuous updating and training, and every

project is vetted by a project manager before being sent to the client. We put our research quality up against any other for general business research and for research within the industries and technical areas in which we specialize.

But just as important to most clients is the quality of the service – Maister argues that it is *more* important than the quality of the work, because service quality is something *everyone* can judge. An individual or an organization can deliver the highest quality work, but if phone calls are not returned promptly or the interactions with either research or support staff is difficult and unpleasant or if project results are chronically late, the client knows that he or she has had an inferior experience. Therefore, the business has to be designed around delivering the highest quality *service* just as much as around delivering the highest quality *work*.

Quality of service in a multi-person firm is aided by these standard capabilities and measures:

- A single intake e-mail box and phone number.
- Managing against metrics for every step in the research 'supply chain', including such check points as response to the client; assigning the project; conducting consultative interviews about the information need; completing the research; completing the quality check; and delivering the project.
- Templates to insure consistent and attractive appearance of reports.
- Guidelines and models for responding to the occasional difficult or disappointed client and the rare, but probably inevitable, mistakes that we make.

Quality of work is assured by adherence to models and processes along these lines:

- Frequent training
- Development and communication of best practices
- Research teams structured for quality control
- Team consultations
- Rich, continually evaluated resource collections.

Both aspects of the experience – the quality of the work and the quality of the service – can be buttressed by continually examining and remodeling processes, by clear communication to both employees and associates of what Threshold’s values and standards are, and by providing assistance when necessary to help individual team members match the standards in their own work and interactions with clients.

In our early years our definition of quality was based on our ‘big I-DEA’ The I-DEA is *information* reports that *delight, enlighten, and assure* our clients – that they have received the best information search possible within the budget and time constraints of their project. [2]

Besides covering only one aspect of the quality experience – it doesn’t really refer to the quality of service – the big I-DEA has become more complex and more challenging to achieve over the past ten years. The small world of the firm and the larger environment in which we operate have changed in at least four ways:

1. While Threshold is still a highly focused business and science research firm, we are striving to graft the identity of a professional services firm on to our long-standing self-image of an independent corporate library service. The advantage of this hybrid model is that it opens up a wider selection of models and theories of service and other aspects of operations. Without doubt, some of the best special library managers have discovered the value of this perspective for themselves. As with the ‘quality equation’, a new perspective helps us – managers and researchers alike – to grow in understanding of what defines excellence in our niche.

2. Looking outside the firm, what it takes to delight clients has changed over the past ten years. The pace of business is faster, so our response to clients has to be faster. Their work lives are busier and more demanding and less stable so our interactions with them have to be consistent, comfortable and easy.

3. Recognition of the importance and value of information has grown as the World Wide Web has become ubiquitous. Social networking tools, blogs, and mash-ups of all kinds have the potential to, and occasional reality of, providing a rich addition to the information mosaic. That means that we cannot get away with just doing

a good Internet search, complemented with a commercial database search, as the foundation for answering our clients’ questions. They expect, and rightly so, that we will find, evaluate, and incorporate information from types of sources that didn’t even exist ten years ago.

4. The complexity and breadth of questions that we are asked to answer has expanded. The larger, more complicated research projects we get now require different project management skills, a different level of collaboration within the research teams and superior writing, analytical, and business sense-making skills. Even standards in document production and delivery formats have changed and become more complex.

A final note on hiring for the quality of experience: most Threshold employees have graduate degrees in library and information science. Some may argue that the library science degree is not necessary to produce good searchers of the Internet and other tools that are more and more designed for end-users. I agree on that point. The reason I hire library science grads, however, is that I know these people have made two commitments in their professional lives. First, they are committed to information work as an end in itself – this drives the quality of the work they produce. Second, by the nature of the core curriculum in most library schools, they are committed to a service ethic. These parallel commitments feed exactly into the first principle of our operations: the quality equation.

Insight #2: Each client is your only client.

A corporate client called one day a couple of years ago to compliment us on some report we delivered to his firm – what it was has been forgotten. But what he said has become another principle by which we operate. He said ‘you always make me feel like I’m your only client.’

We ascribe to the notion that confidentiality, with or without formal agreements, is a sacred trust between a requestor or client and their information professional. It has always been a rule in our business that we never discuss other clients’ projects nor even mention one client to another without permission. But after that remark we also make a point of not alluding to

other commitments in even the most general sense, not even statements about how busy we may be at that moment. We do not want to remind any client that he or she shares our attention with other clients. And here is another reason to encourage the use of e-mail to submit requests: on frantic days, when demand exceeds immediate supply of research time, it is really hard to keep the tension out of one's voice when yet another client calls.

Inevitably, there will be occasions when one has to negotiate with a client for a longer deadline. Even in those situations we try very hard to be matter of fact and speak generally of more appropriate timing based on the requirements of that client's particular project. In the course of a busy day, with multiple phone calls and deadlines to meet, it is hard to be tranquil and focused on each caller, one at a time, but we strive to do so, and evidently hit the mark more times than not.

Another practice that reinforces the client experience of focused attention will be seen as a no-brainer by most corporate libraries and by solo information professionals, but it can not be taken for granted in bigger research firms. In our firm, members of the research teams are enabled and encouraged to contact clients directly to clarify the information search problem, to confer on forks in the road, and to give progress reports. Often there will be two levels of project management between the end-client and the researcher – one on the client side and one on our side. In those cases, direct communication between the researcher and the end-user/client will always yield better results for that end-client. And there is an added benefit in that talking directly to the client supports the searcher's sense of ownership of the information problem and reduces any sense of being out of the loop.

Insight #3: Never say no

In my corporate life as a manager of information staff, one of our mantras was 'Never say no.' If for what ever reason one is not able to fill an order, meet a request as initially expressed, or deliver what an internal client thinks he or she wants, always find a way to give that person some help, even if it is just pointing them to a potential source.

When I was still a solo operator, the point came in my business where I was sorely tempted to turn away a new client. But it occurred to me to ask myself how I would feel – not what I would do or what I would think – but how I would *feel* if I went to a store on a normal business day and found the doors locked. Knowing my own short fuse, I know I would be a little angry or frustrated at, in effect, being told 'no, we can't help you today.' And I probably would be loath to go to that store again. That recognition was one of the motivations to build a multi-searcher firm.

These days, saying 'no' is not an option if the work is appropriate to our capabilities. Of course we want to grow revenues by accepting new business when it comes our way. But appropriateness of each project is a serious consideration. If the project involves something that we have never done before or that doesn't involve information search, we may suggest alternative suppliers. But if the project is something that is close-but-not-quite what we are accustomed to doing, like analyzing a pre-existing information collection, for instance, we may accept the project.

Rather than risk agreeing to a task that seems on first hearing to be impossible or that would be too far outside our comfort zone, we offer to consider the project and to get back to the client within twenty-four hours. More often than not, the project comes into focus, we think of one of our associates who has the needed expertise, or we determine we could do what is needed for a larger fee. These 'yesses' that we struggle a little bit over sometimes result in the most lucrative work we do and sometimes we lose money on them in order to do a quality job. But they always stretch our capabilities. There is still risk but we have taken the time to be sure it is a rational business risk.

Another factor that drives us to say 'yes' to as many projects as possible is the company's responsibility to its employees. A corporate library may be juggling between a perceived responsibility for helping every employee with an information need, on the one hand, and resource constraints, on the other hand, which make it necessary, and even politically astute, to focus on a strategic subset of employees. An independent information specialist has the

freedom to decide which projects to take and which to walk away from. Setting aside revenue goals for a minute, an information search firm has a responsibility to employees and associates to keep the pipeline of work as full as possible so that job security is not an issue.

Insight #4: Processes are (almost) as important as people

In my early years as a business owner I was greatly influenced by [The E-Myth](#), a popular business book by Michael E. Gerber. It is subtitled 'Why Most Small Businesses Don't Work and What to Do About It.' [3] Gerber makes the case that people that are good at some technical craft often fail as business owners. The technical expert, in my case, the information specialist, needs to learn to work 'on the business' rather than 'in the business' if the business is to be successful. He or she has to be equally a manager and an entrepreneur – strategic thinker, visionary, and all around driving force – as well as a technician. And eventually, as the business grows, she has to delegate most of the technical work and some portion of the managerial work.

A major part of 'working on the business' is to think through and document processes for every business function. This was a valuable insight for me in the early days. After hiring our first employee, I was able to work little by little *on* the business. I began to think about and document systems and processes, and figure out how processes that worked with 10 projects a month, might work with 100 or more projects a month.

And how do people fit into those processes? As every reader will know, individuals perform multiple functions in small businesses. It is important to plan for the growth of each of those functions. As the business grows some of those functions become large enough to take up all of one person's time. Others remain part-time jobs until the business grows to yet a bigger stage. I think the first organization chart for Threshold had six boxes when we only had three employees. Because we added a science research practice and a couple of assistant boxes, the current org chart has more boxes than the original, but not many more. And there are still

– and will always be – more boxes than people filling those boxes.

For instance, at one time, a position called project manager was part of the job of the same person who did marketing and business development (yours truly, of course). A few years ago, the job of project manager was hived off on to one of our researcher/analysts. It eventually became her full-time job. Two years ago that function was split among two people who became business project manager and science project manager. The business project manager interfaces with established clients who have routine requests, assigns the incoming business projects to business researchers, and vets the completed reports for quality before sending them out to clients.

The science project manager does the same thing for technical projects. Because that side of the company is smaller than the business research side, the science project manager also does searching. So the job of project manager has become all of one person's job and part of another's job. But the only way that the org chart changed was to add the position of science project manager to reflect the needs of that new division.

Finance and information technology and telecommunications each occupy a box on the organization chart, but the same not quite full-time employee holds both positions. An organization chart with boxes reflecting each discrete function seems a little grandiose perhaps, but it does help one think big in visualizing the needs of the business.

Each of the boxes on the chart is associated with multiple documented processes. For instance, there is a written process for producing each current awareness service and one for invoicing clients and another for orienting associates, to name just a few. These are compiled into operations manuals, such as a Research Operations Manual.

Keeping up with changes in processes takes some significant effort and we are always a little behind, but we think attention to processes is especially helpful in maintaining the quality of service. Processes are less important for quality of work because researchers and analysts are likely to express their personal pride in their

work by doing their best work fairly consistently.

We most benefit from documented processes when there is a change of personnel or when the stability of a process begins to break down. That happens most often when the occasional exception or special circumstance starts to become the norm. In those situations we haul out the process manuals (figuratively, of course, because they are all electronic documents) and we try to figure out how to tame a feral process.

Solo independent information specialists may not need to have documented processes. But solo librarians working in corporate settings may find it useful, and larger operations almost certainly must document processes. A well thought out process will have a measurement component as well. Ideally, all of the processes in our information search firm would be measurable. Some of ours are and others could be – if the pace of keeping up with day-to-day client demands would allow for that level of management.

Insight #5: Don't let your attention wander...

... but do take opportunities to build on your core competency. Threshold Information is an information search and analysis firm. We are consultants and practitioners in one sphere: how to find solutions to specific information retrieval problems. We find information, evaluate and select it, acquire it for our clients, organize it, and point out what we think is most important in what we found. Most of our work is secondary research: we identify information in published or publicly available sources, usually electronic. Some of our work involves telephone research. All of it is done in our central office or in researchers' home offices rather than at a client site.

Within that framework there are some variations:

- Our products fall into two categories: ad hoc on demand research and monitoring services. That is, we answer research questions and we produce current awareness services.
- We work in many subject areas: consumer products, the food industry,

pharmaceuticals, financial services, electronics, and more, depending on what our clients need to know and the expertise that exists in our fairly rich network of resources.

- Our deliverables take many forms: reports templated to be seamless with clients' internal reports; presented under our own banner; as newsletters embedded in e-mail; or as html documents posted in intranets.

Beyond that, we do not do consulting. Any advice we might give clients about how to handle specific information problems or what resources to acquire is proffered strictly as a professional courtesy and in the spirit of collegiality.

We do not place personnel on-site in client facilities. We do not do recruiting or database design or Web site design or cataloging or training. In other words, we keep our focus on research. That does not mean we ignore opportunities that expand on or complement our core competency.

For instance, we frequently accept projects that are more about analysis than they are about research. These usually involve evaluating and making sense of large collections of information that a client might provide to us. For instance, we may summarize lengthy reports or identify patterns in information gathered through interviews.

The most significant expansion of our work came three years ago when we formed a team of science researchers. Until about 2002 Threshold's services were almost entirely in the area of general business issues applicable to all industries and non-technical topics specific to consumer products, financial services, retailing and a few other industries. When a local pharmaceutical firm closed its library, with a little nudging from a manager there, we saw an opportunity to expand our capabilities and eventually hired three of the former employees of the pharmaceutical company.

With the addition of the science-oriented researchers we had two teams, the business research team and the science team. Each team has a core group of researchers that do only business or only science research. Each team has a project manager who decides which team

member is best suited to each project as it comes in, monitors the progress of each project, and checks each project report for quality. The core of each team is expanded as needed by its own established network of associates.

Since many projects involve some combination of concepts from the technical arena and from the marketing or financial arena, the synergy between our two teams is a great benefit to clients. For certain industries, notably food and pharmaceuticals and agriculture, we are a full-service research partner, with business and science and technology, including expert patent searching, within our capabilities.

Having the two teams allows for some buffering of the natural ups and downs of demand. When one team is somewhat slow, it frequently happens that the other team is very busy. We expect to begin soon to partition at least one of the teams into two pods that will consist of three to five searchers each and a lead-searcher that will oversee assignment of projects and perform quality control. We expect each pod to have designated clients. This structure is our attempt to maintain the quality equation and sustain client intimacy – ‘you make me feel like I’m your only client’ – while accepting more clients.

The challenge in this scenario is, of course, to manage costs. We obviously have not thrown in the towel in the face of the trend toward outsourcing to low labor cost countries. We believe that the firm that delivers flexible, high-touch, high-tech, high value-added expert research services has a competitive advantage. But we also know that our clients are not insensitive to costs. We know we will have to manage every job so that highly experienced, more expensive employees are not used to perform tasks – document preparation, for instance – that a lower cost employee could do.

We engage contractors to help us manage fluctuating volume, and also for special projects and special expertise. Our use of these non-employee associates is growing as the opportunities that come to Threshold continue to grow in diversity and complexity. Our network of associates – that is, contractors or leased employees that are highly efficient at certain tasks – is likely to grow faster than our employee base. This is another cost-containment strategy.

A quality challenge comes with the growing use of contractors. We know from experience that great care has to be used in integrating associates into project teams. Threshold orientations and vendor training we arrange, plus other professional development opportunities, help to insure seamless quality of work. We also hope that these efforts to integrate associates will be seen by independent information professionals as benefits to working with Threshold, in addition to fair pay for their assistance. We believe that a careful and consistent methodology for making associates part of our team will benefit clients.

Conclusion

Lessons about customer service and process are always and everywhere two of the most basic that a manager needs to learn. Another basic lesson is how to choose good people to work with and then to appreciate those people. Without researchers devoted to doing the best job every time for every client and without a supporting crew striving day in and day out to provide the best possible client experience, there would be nothing worth writing about. So thank you to the staff and associates of Threshold Information.

Common ground enough exists among business researchers so that I think that any reader, whether corporate librarian or independent information specialist, will have found something interesting in the five insights discussed here. I hope information professionals working in corporate settings read some affirmation of their own approaches to customer service or gained a fresh perspective for thinking about their own functions. For other interested people, like our colleagues in information search firms and independent consultants who may be contemplating scaling-up, this discussion may have given insights – although certainly not a complete picture – into how such a firm can operate.

[1] Maister, David (1993). *Managing the Professional Service Firm*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

[2] Guidry, Lori (2003). 'What's the Big I-DEA? Research Presentation Tips.' *ONLINE* 27(1) pp33-35.

[3] Gerber, Michael E. (1995). *The E-Myth Revisited: Why Most Small Businesses Don't Work and What to Do About It*. New York: Harper Collins.

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