



THE PROBLEMS INVOLVED IN DEFINING OUR WORK ARE DEEP-SEATED.

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I recall a friend and colleague who told me about an episode which is emblematic. His daughter at school had just had a lesson in which each member of the class had to talk about their parents' jobs. So the children proudly took turns: My father is a fireman. My mother is a shop assistant. My parents have a fruit and vegetable shop. When it came to her turn, the little girl said: well I don't really know what my daddy does...he goes to meetings...

Not even our closest family members understand what we professionals are doing, never mind our clients.

The theme at hand is the problem involved in helping our clients see the value of the work we do. The professional services we provide are like a ghost. They can't be seen unless we wrap them in a sheet, i.e. somehow define them so the beneficiaries can actually see them.

First and foremost, we often find that the value of a piece of advice is not in proportion with the work done, and the time needed to do it. The anecdote of the great Chinese programmer summoned after many failed attempts to unblock a supercomputer, who overcame a total impasse with just one line of code, is emblematic, as is indeed was his fee: one hundred thousand and one Euro. One Euro for the code, and one hundred thousand for knowing how and at what point of the source he needed to write it.

Moreover, clients are almost never aware of what goes on in the back office. When a chartered accountant presents an opinion written on just a handful of pages, or an expert's report, the client only sees a wad of sheets and asks himself why it is that those scraps of paper cost more than their weight in gold. The client has no idea just how many

long nights, how many second thoughts, how much research has gone into the work. He doesn't know how much present and prior experience he is actually buying. He pretends not to know that he is dealing with a person who has agreed to share his risk. But we shouldn't hold our clients to blame for all this.

Who else is responsible for shedding light on the value of the professional, if not the professionals themselves?

At times, the professionals are the first to play down the value of their consultancy by giving it free of charge. It's all included in the flat-rate accounting, tax consulting, auditing or corporate consultancy fee. No way! The owner of a software house used to gift his clients hundreds of Euros worth of handheld PCs and printers every year as a form of discount, but would never have dreamed of cutting the working hours he billed for his technicians.

Often it is the professionals themselves who underestimate the importance of the packaging, a bit like Dr. House. Yet a nice present becomes even nicer when properly gift-wrapped.

Imagine a professional who receives a call half-way through a full-on morning, at that time of year when his studio is flooded with work. How can he not answer the call from his studio's most important client, even if he does have two members of staff sitting in front of him, a client in the waiting room and new mails rolling into his inbox like listings on the stock exchange?

The super client just needs a few minutes of our time for a quick question. Only the quick question is a very tricky issue: he needs to sell a piece of machinery on the spot to a representative of the International Railways

Federation, a distant relation of the UN, who states it is not liable for added value tax. Whilst this would really merit the assistance of a university professor, the client needs an answer right away, otherwise he loses the deal. So he skips lunch to resolve this awkward problem and, after conducting breakneck searches, comes across an old opinion published by the Ministry of Finance. In the end, caught up in the whirlwind of events, he texts the client an affirmative answer. The result is that work, which is high in value and responsibility, risks not even being invoiced, or at least not sufficiently valued. If he tried to quantify it with more than a handful of Euros, the client might well hit the roof.

The effect would have been altogether different if, for example, he had drafted a written document to be delivered to the client, or if he had drafted a brief presentation with visual supports. But there was no time.

It is no coincidence if, for example, auditing companies return their financial statement verdicts on half a sheet of A4, which has to be copied from accounting principles, but then pad out the report to make sure the resulting folder is two inches thick and weighs in at several kilos.

The packaging difference, of how to go about presenting the work, whatever it is, is also needed to justify the price difference in the eyes of the clients.

The virtualisation and speed with which relationships are conducted do not help us to define our work. Yet the same consultation provided over the phone or verbally is far less likely to be paid than a mail. And a brief opinion in word or pdf attached to a mail will achieve a higher price, because it will seem that we have dedicated far more time and attention to the task. And, as already said, a paper document delivered to the client along with a short set of slides to

be projected will further enhance the work done.

And so it is that an important but overly short opinion will see the results of copious bibliographic searches attached in a nicely padded dossier. If the opinion looks weighty, it's bound to be an opinion of substance.

Showing the paperwork and supporting documentation can also help clients to gain a better understanding.

At times, it is enough merely to tell the client what we have done verbally. The tax break is worth that much more if we quantify it. Did you realise this optimisation has allowed me to save you eight thousand Euro? And if I bill you one hundred for the paperwork, you can't pretend to faint like you usually do.

An overly hasty reply to a question can also, paradoxically, undermine its value.

Even in the phases conducted prior to consultancy work, defining the work involved can help overcome the client's reticence. Handing over our book the first time we meet allows them to see our experience with their own eyes. Highlighting membership of our network properly allows them to perceive our value, which is at the disposal of the Client.

Explaining the process which will be pursued helps clients grasp the difficulties we face and the commitment involved on our part. Our websites and brochures might describe cases that we have solved, with suitably disguised names and the prior consent of the clients themselves, as well as underscoring our membership of Clarkson Hyde Global.

As we have seen, there is no shortage of methods and techniques for pinning down the ghosts of our work. And if we want to take care of our material interests, we need to start defining the work we do.

Membership of Clarkson Hyde Global and cooperation between the network's

colleagues can doubtless help our Clients to grasp the value which is at their disposal.

We wish you every success in your work and remind you that the board is entirely at your disposal for helping you to define your business relations, including those with Clients.