

## **Services marketing: What happened to honour, reputation and trust?**

As a code of conduct, '*my word is my bond*' harks back to a bygone age when honour, reputation and trust were the mainstays of the commercial transaction, and the legal contract simply documented the agreement. Losing 'face' was a serious matter of reputation, whilst resorting to the fine detail of the contract signalled desperation.

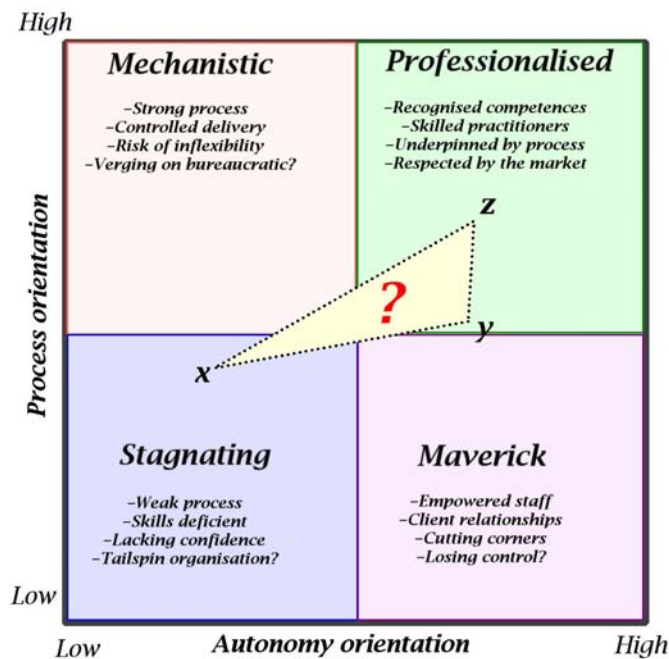
Sadly, this is no longer the case. In the intervening years, the pendulum has swung in favour of contracts, service level agreements, small print and litigation, with honour, trust and reputation diminishing in importance. Too often, objective reasoning has been sacrificed on the altar of short-term gain.

The recession of 2009 appears likely to exacerbate the imbalance. With the reputation of the financial services sector in tatters, almost universal distaste for the 'fat cat' and the emergence of pre-packaged administration, enabling Company Directors to dodge their debts with apparent impunity, who would entirely trust a professional these days?

Beyond the immediate economic and social effects of the recession, the rubbing of reputation and honour does not bode well for the longer-term development of the UK's professional and technical services sector. Suspicion abounds, and with trust in the professional service provider appearing to be at an all-time low, those who deliver people-based services could do worse than take a step back to consider how to regain the trust of the marketplace.

It has long been recognised that unique challenges have to be overcome when marketing, selling and delivering intangibles such as competence, skill, capability and professional expertise. This represents a real challenge for the seller, and is no less complex for the buyer. Whether it's the outsourcing of core business processes, the receipt of technical expertise or simply gaining access to good advice, choice in the marketplace appears infinite, service differentiation is transient at best and marketing-speak abounds. In the world of services marketing, it is all too easy to obfuscate.

Yet, professionalism is the rock upon which any service economy should be built. With its image somewhat tarnished and laid bare for all to see, surely it is high time that the service sector re-established a professional connection with the marketplace. Rather than developing another smooth, catch-all marketing message, for individual service providers such an effort demands a re-consideration of the meaning of professionalism and a much more in-depth understanding of those organisational attributes which constitute a professional ethos. I call this process 'professionalisation'. It has many facets.



The diagram above represents just one aspect of how an organisation might drive its professionalisation effort. Referring to the successful application of competence-based professionalism, the model begs a range of questions relevant to the operating ethos of the organisation, including the influence of its heritage on day-to-day operations and its future direction. With one eye fixed firmly on applying core competence to develop market confidence, it ultimately questions whether the market receives a service provider's message with confidence and credibility or mere incredulity.

In a highly competitive and often confusing marketplace, there can be no doubt that reputation, honour and trust lend equal weight to that of technical expertise, skill and competence in the delivery of unique services and the development of long-term customer relationships. The challenge for the service provider moving forward is to persuade an understandably sceptical marketplace that its reputation for integrity and objectivity constitutes an increasingly important attribute of its brand.

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