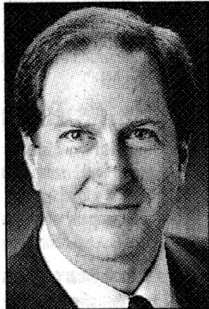


Generalists tend to do better than specialists, expert says

By Victor Godinez

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Andrew Sobel

The biggest mistake that salespeople, consultants and corporate managers make is to overspecialize, consultant Andrew Sobel says.

"Clients start out like that, saying, 'I do need an expert in this area.' But, ultimately, they stick with the professionals who provide synthesis, a big picture view, more than just expertise," said Mr. Sobel, who recently outlined his plan for sales success in the book *Clients for Life*.

The book, written with fellow consultant Jagdish Sheth, says that many professionals think they can dazzle their clients with factual information, although most clients value advisers who ask insightful questions and can talk about a variety of subjects and demonstrate personal conviction.

Mr. Sobel was in Dallas recently to speak to students at Southern Methodist University. He addressed the myths and realities of client relationships. After the talk, Mr. Sobel sat down for an interview with *The Dallas Morning News*. Excerpts follow:

Q: In *Clients for Life*, you talk about debunking some of the myths about the client/professional relationship and what it takes to keep clients for life. What are some of those myths?

A: "I think one of the main myths is that it is enough to pick a field you like and then specialize in it. ...

"Another myth a lot of people have about top executives is that they have access to the best advisers, the best minds in the world. Yet, when we spoke to CEOs, many lamented being unable to find outside professionals who combined the kind of good judgment they sought in tandem with devotion to the client's interests.

"The third myth, or set of myths, is that our role with clients is to provide answers, convey expertise and be an 'authority' in a narrow subject matter. The truth is that clients treasure synthesis more than analysis, a 'deep generalist' more than a narrow specialist, someone who asks great questions in addition to providing answers, and so on."

Q: You cite several famous advisers and professionals in your book. What qualities do you think they had in common to make them so valuable to their students, leaders and clients?

A: "Actually, they all present some aspect of the attributes that we mention in the book. Aristotle, for example, exemplified the learner, while [Gen.] George Marshall [who created the Marshall Plan for European recovery after World War II] demonstrated great personal conviction and Thomas More [the Catholic prelate who refused to support Henry VIII's first divorce] had that selfless independence.

"Another important attribute is the mindset of independent wealth. If you go into the relationship with a feeling of affluence, then you don't let money become the driving force. It's much easier to say no to a client that way."

Q: For which sorts of professionals and salespeople would you say these qualities are relevant today?

A: "This is not just for salespeople. It's for anyone who develops any kind of business relationship with a client. By 'client' I don't mean the person in Albertson's buying milk. That's a customer. A client is someone who represents an organization and requires guidance in finding the best solutions for their company.

"While that has gotten to be more important over the last few years, it's also gotten harder. With so much information easily available to the client in the form of the Internet, you have to go beyond simply providing a narrow expertise and be able to synthesize that information into a broad view that helps the client to do business."