

## Winning Clients...By Being Dumb

By Justin Locke

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Let's begin with a fairly obvious statement: The financial advisory business is based on the one, simple idea that people will entrust the management of their money to someone else, hopefully to you.

There's a lot to be said for being skilled at all the complex number-crunching involved in managing that money, but if those wealthy people don't trust you in the first place, all that management skill is for

naught.

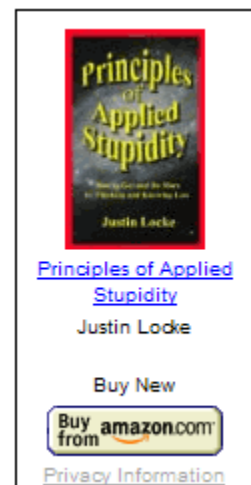
Again and again, the question is: How do you persuade wealthy people to trust you with their money? And why should they trust you, as opposed to someone else?

One common answer is that you should manage their money because you are smart. After all, you study constantly, think hard and fast, went to school a long time, and know a lot. It seems eminently logical that you can spur more sales by impressing potential clients with your intellect. This will make them want to hire you, right?

Not so fast.

On closer inspection, that answer doesn't hold up. If people are hiring you solely because of your superior intelligence, the moment they find someone smarter, they will immediately dump you and hire that competitor. And emphasizing how smart you are can actually work against you.

"Smart," after all, is not a scientific term. It's subjective, and it really refers to your relative social status. If you emphasize how smart you are, you run a substantial risk of making a potential customer feel relatively "dumb." Part of your clients' sense of social status and importance is how well they have managed their lives to date. If you challenge their sense of achievement by saying you know better, well, no matter how much good you can ultimately do them, this challenge will very likely make them want to avoid you ... no matter how smart you are.





But surely you can't risk looking dumb; that would be a total disaster, right?

Well, again, not so fast.

First of all, you needn't be so afraid of "looking dumb." Your rivals and competitors may be on the lookout for missteps on your part, and they may use them as an excuse to beat you down, but who cares? They're not going to buy from you anyway. Your clients are much more magnanimous. They're not looking at you critically. They ARE looking critically at themselves. No matter how afraid you are of looking stupid, your potential clients are just as afraid of looking stupid as you are, if not more so. You can use this to your advantage, by making your clients feel "smart" – yes, even smarter than you – with no ill effects whatsoever.

You can make your clients feel "smart" in a number of ways. One easy trick is to simply tell yourself that they are undiscovered geniuses in their field or their hobby and relate to them on that basis. Give up on telling them how smart you are, and instead appreciate how smart they are. Right away, this will place you head-and-shoulders above your competitors, who are constantly announcing their "product features."

For example, if a potential client has a beautiful garden, and you know nothing about botany, you can say, "Gee, this is a beautiful garden. I always wanted to have a beautiful garden but I never knew where to start." In my experience, if they love gardening, instead of belittling you, they will talk your ear off about their chrysanthemums. Though it may not seem like it, that's a vital breakthrough. Once they have been given a chance to display their knowledge, then the conversation is imbalanced, and it needs to be balanced by them offering you the same courtesy of letting you display your knowledge.

When you start to show genuine appreciation for someone else's intelligence and knowledge, you don't lose status. Instead, that person will think you are a genius for your ability to appreciate their heretofore unappreciated genius. It may sound like manipulation, but all I'm suggesting is that you stop exhibiting the limiting, competitive behavior and instead start using your own perceptions in a socially positive way.

When you were three years old, you knew nothing, you were constantly asking questions, and you were always asking people to tell you stories. Everyone loved you. It worked then, and it works now.

I used to work for a guy who said of his clients, "When they're talking, I'm selling." Everyone loves to talk, and few people want to listen. Since you are a brilliant advisor, you already know all about the law of supply and demand. Be a rare commodity – a listener. There are lots of people announcing how smart they are. How many people told you how smart you are today? If anyone did, I'll bet that experience stuck out. No matter who you are dealing with, ask questions; display ignorance; ask their opinions; make people feel



smart.

By the way, here's the kicker: Some of them might actually have something really interesting to say.

*[Justin Locke](#) is the author of "Principles of Applied Stupidity," an amusing look at how to depart from the conventional wisdom. As a speaker and seminar leader, he offers fundamental techniques on how to divest yourself and your organization of industrial-revolution-era management methods.*

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