

PICK YOUR CLIENTS WISELY



My Dad once told me to pick my students wisely. It took me years to realise he was also giving me some of the best business advice I would ever receive.

I remember telling my Dad when I was around 16 years of age that I was intending to become a professional golfer.

I did not want to follow in his footsteps and become a club professional, nor, for that matter, did I want to be a coach. I wanted to play the game of golf and make my living from doing so.

Fast forward just seven years and things had changed. I had indeed turned professional and was making my living from competing. Not a great living, but at least I was making my way.

I had met Sue and realised that the meagre living I was making for myself would not support any kind of reasonable lifestyle for the two of us.

I remember telling my Dad that I was changing tack. I didn't need his permission. After all, I was 23 years old, engaged to be married to Sue and together we had bought our first

house. But I respected my Dad. I respected his opinion and his advice. I had also been fortunate to have him provide a guiding hand throughout my playing days.

So when I told him that I intended to stop playing competitively and start applying for club professional jobs that included teaching, I was interested to hear what he thought.

He simply said, "Ahh, I see. Well, my best advice is to pick your students wisely."

At first, I thought this was simply advice about coaching.

As a player, my future had largely been in my own hands. Quite literally. It was me holding and swinging the club. My reputation was forged by my performance.

Coaching is different.

To some degree, when teaching, your reputation is placed in somebody else's hands. You can build a good relationship, agree a sensible plan and give the best advice you can, but what happens next also depends on the student.

Do they practise? Do they listen? Do they provide honest feedback? Do they take some responsibility for their own improvement?

If they do, there is a good chance that both player and coach will make progress.

If they don't, things become rather more difficult.

That is why I would now make one distinction that I probably did not understand at the time. Coaching a good player is not necessarily easier. Coaching a coachable player is.

Of course, Dad's advice was easier to understand than to follow.

When you are starting a coaching business, you rarely have the luxury of picking your students. You take the bookings that come your way and try to make the best of every one.

On the first day in my first club professional job, I opened my lesson diary and found exactly what you might expect.

Nothing.

A completely blank page.

I had already done plenty of teaching during my apprentice years as an assistant professional, but this was different. This was the start of a career that would become inextricably linked with coaching and coach education.

I cannot remember who booked that first lesson, but I do know that I did not try to assess whether they were coachable before accepting the booking. I took the student on and hoped for the best.

Whoever they were must have done reasonably well because before too long I was teaching as much as I wanted. Bad news travels particularly quickly in a golf club, especially in the bar after a round, so at least I had avoided that particular banana skin.

Being a club professional, certainly in the UK at that time, involved far more than coaching. Sue and I also had a business to run.

It was there that I began to understand that Dad's advice had a much wider application.

Around the same time, I was becoming increasingly interested in business and remember reading that you often make money on the deals you do not do.

That took me a while to understand.

Surely a sale was a sale.

Gradually, however, I began to notice that some of the deals where we had been pushed hardest on price also became the most troublesome.

It was almost Sod's Law. When the profit margin had been squeezed to the absolute limit, something seemed to go wrong.

I particularly remember one member who bought a pair of waterproof golf shoes in a sale. Just before the guarantee expired, his feet became wet while playing, and so the shoes were replaced.

Almost another guarantee period later, exactly the same thing happened again.

And yes, the original pair had already been heavily discounted. Later, I found out that this was this particular member's 'game'.

By then I was beginning to understand the point.

The price of a transaction tells you very little about its real value.

Some clients are simply expensive to service. Others consume disproportionate amounts of time. Some require constant reassurance. Some challenge every agreement. Some create problems that have little relationship to the amount of business they bring.

This does not mean that demanding clients are bad clients.

Some of the best clients I have worked with have been incredibly demanding. They expected high standards, challenged thinking and wanted results. But the relationship worked because there was mutual respect, clear communication and a shared responsibility for making things successful.

That is very different from a relationship where only one side is expected to carry the load.

Over the years, I have therefore become increasingly interested in what might be called the real cost of doing business.

There is the obvious financial cost, of course. But there is also the cost in time, attention, reputation and energy.

And then there is the emotional cost.

That one is much harder to put on a spreadsheet.

A client or partner can be profitable on paper and still take something away from the business. Too much management time. Too much unnecessary conflict. Too many conversations that you know are going nowhere.

Sometimes the financial return is simply not worth the emotional cost of the relationship.

I still get it wrong from time to time. Occasionally I agree to something that later becomes far more difficult to maintain than I had imagined. Experience has not made me immune to poor judgement.

But I have got better at recognising that not every piece of business is good business. And not every business relationship is worth maintaining.

We all spend a great deal of time thinking about why clients should choose us.

Perhaps we should spend a little more time thinking about why we should choose them.

It turns out my Dad was not simply giving me advice about coaching.

He was giving me advice about business.

Tony Bennett

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