

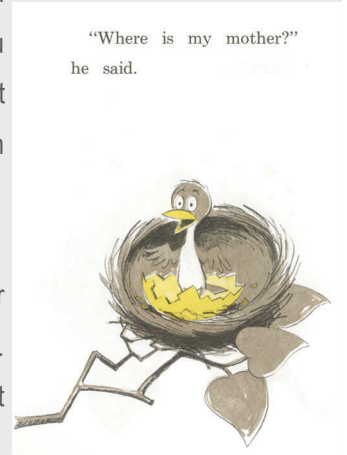
This article from Chris may be of interest, especially for B2B clients. It highlights the need to identify which senior manager or partner will take personal responsibility for the health of each client relationship.

Are You My Mother?

A fable for professional services firms by Chris Bray

Do you remember the children's book, *Are You My Mother?* Most people seem to... the mother bird dashes off to get some food for her imminent arrival, but the baby hatches while she's gone and decides to go find Mum. It meets chickens, dogs, boats, planes and asks all of them the same question, "Are you my Mother?" The rejection and disappointments are an emotional roller-coaster, but everything ends happily when the steam shovel puts the baby bird back in its nest and mum returns.

It is unlikely to have occurred to you before, but *Are You My Mother?* has a moral for professional services firms. If you think about it, even grown-ups like to know who mother is. Somehow the world seems less bewildering when you know where you belong and that someone's there with your best interests at heart.



Certainly clients need to know who mother is. Someone in your firm they feel connected to. Someone who knows all about them and who - *they* know - takes responsibility for their welfare. It's not rational, it's emotional. It's not likely to be something they mention, because it's probably not something they are conscious of, but having a "mother" changes the way they feel. Having a mother means it's less likely the client will get lost and wander off into the big wide world.

There's another dimension to this as well. Typically, clients choose their own mother. The first person they meet when they come into your nest... Bam, that's mother. Again, clients won't be aware that is what's happening, but the "chemistry" between them and the person who embodies your company at that first meeting will be the deciding factor. If there's no chemistry – then no matter how compelling your firm's credentials – it is unlikely there will be an engagement.



All of which has implications for decisions we make about managing client relationships. Decisions like who should do what at the new client presentation and what happens after the client comes on board. Typically, we take a structural approach. We have a new business team that does the pitch and subsequently we explain to the client our organisation chart. We introduce them to the various dogs and cats and birds and planes we employ, and let them get on with it. They are big people, what's the problem? Especially if our structure includes "account managers" or similar, whose job it is to look after the client.

The problem is, where's mother?

Please turn over...

He could not fly, but he could walk. "Now I will go and find my mother," he said.



Here's a different approach. First of all, be conscious that every client needs a mother. And understand that "mother" and "account manager" are not the same thing. "Mother" is not a badge, it's a bond.

Second, when you are preparing for a meeting with a potential client, decide who you are going to position as mother. Make the decision at that point, not after you've won the business – by then the client will have made their own choice. Because being mother is a life-long responsibility, if the managing director or senior partner cannot take it on, then someone else must lead. Select the person on your senior team you think the client is most likely to connect with. That person then has to step up and play a significant role in the initial meeting. Make it

quite explicit during your presentation that this is the person who will be the client's senior contact. Whoever else they deal with in the firm, this person is going to take personal responsibility for the success of the relationship.

Note that this is not to propose a single point of contact for the client: that they can only talk to Mother. Nor is it to suggest there isn't a role for someone to manage the day-to-day relationship; quite the reverse. Encourage the client to interact freely with all your people, but make it clear that the buck stops somewhere, and if there is ever a problem, then they should come to momma.

More importantly, live the role. Mother does not have to be at every meeting, but you must be visible and you do need to care. Mother should be checking in with the client periodically and should initiate a regular (annual?) review of the relationship.

Finally, remember that - whatever we might prefer – the client will actually decide who they want to be mother. If you thought you were mother but realise the client has bonded with someone else, then reorganize the responsibilities.

Every client needs a mother. It's a bond they form right at the beginning of the relationship and it is not transferable. Rather than pretend it isn't there, plan for it and manage for it. The benefit will be stronger and more enduring client relationships.

Are You My Mother? was first published in 1960 by Random House. The Author, Philip Dey (PD) Eastman, was a screenwriter who'd worked at Disney and Warner Brothers and as an author worked with Dr Suess. He died in 1986.

