

# Reluctant Client

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Pete Changra has been depressed, and his gloom grows with every delay of a marketing program for his finance client. The client had come to him nine months ago with a request to position the company aggressively in light of tough economic times. The client said the market would grow even more difficult over the next five years as customers pulled back and deals disappeared. There would be a shake-out, and hundreds of firms would close their doors or merge. Major players would remain, and niche players able to defend segments.

Changra, a PR manager for a midtown Manhattan agency, agreed with this view and the urgency to position the company before shake-out. As Changra would learn, however, there were other reasons to hurry. Like many financial firms, the client had made little effort to get its name known outside of its niche. When Changra had first proposed an integrated marketing program, it became apparent that critical marketing systems were missing. For 25 years, the client had plenty of business and no problem getting customers or finding deals. It grew organically and by word of mouth. Partners and principals would speak to the media occasionally if they chose to, but more often they would not. The firm had a web page but there was little on it. The firm had no consolidated contact list. It did use a mailing list to send financial reports to investors, but the names were of junior analysts within investors' organizations and not those of senior people who were day-to-day contacts. Partners and principals kept customer names in private lists and in their heads. The firm had no outreach program to potential customers and transaction partners. Sales calls were ad hoc and not rationalized. Changra's client needed to crawl before it could walk, and there were months of crawling before the firm could do coordinated PR and marketing.

After weeks of no action on his proposals, Changra had concluded there were two reasons for delay. Partners were not used to marketing, and they were busy. Disciplined marketing took third place to client service and deals. Since the industry had not yet hit the wall, partners and principals were scrambling to serve customers and complete transactions. They assumed, apparently, that when customers disappeared and deals were hard to come by, they could turn to marketing. There would be time. But, every day without action increased the client's jeopardy and moved it closer to pending turmoil.

Changra had argued in vain against waiting. He told his client it took time to build the marketing machinery they needed and to shake it down. It took time to create content for customers, transaction partners and prospects. Although he didn't say this, it took time as well to change behaviors of financial professionals who had never engaged in systematic marketing. Partners listened politely in long meetings in their conference room. They took notes and made promises. Nothing happened.

Changra had begun sending news clips about the industry and its troubles to senior partners. Although he knew they were well aware of emerging problems, he wanted to keep the urgency of acting before them. Partners thanked him in e-mails, and nothing more would happen. Changra had sent monthly e-mails asking when final decisions would be made, when the program would launch, who the contact(s) would be for day-to-day implementation. The e-mails weren't answered. Instead partners would ask him to write a release about a just-completed transaction.

Changra had turned to writing long and detailed warnings to senior partners about the industry's future and the firm's place in it, about the need to act now, about rumors he heard on the Street, about general opinions of the firm and its prospects. These would spark meetings but nothing more. Changra began to wonder if partners and principals were living in a cocoon, so concerned about short-term results that they had no time to look to the long term. That didn't seem accurate, however, because it was the client who had come to him in the first place and had analyzed the industry situation accurately. As months passed, Changra surmised that being too busy to begin the marketing program was an excuse for denial. Intellectually, the partners knew what lay before them. Emotionally they were not ready to confront it. Yet, the partners never became angry with Changra's insistence. They thanked him for looking out for the firm and for being there for them. This left Changra baffled. He had become the client's approved "scold" whose job it was to keep the long-term perspective in front of the firm but nothing more.

The agency's general manager had been pressuring Changra to get the marketing program launched and could not understand the delay. He suggested to Changra that Changra hadn't gone about developing and selling the program in the right way. Changra was offended and said so. He asked the general manager to attend the next client meeting and suggested the general manager take the lead. The general manager did. Nothing came of the meeting or of promises the senior partners made. That did not lessen pressure on Changra. Every week the general manager asked about progress. Every week Changra would show e-mails, logs of phone calls, notes from meetings and report delay.

It was the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> month since the initial client meeting when the general manager called Changra to his office.

"We've got to get off dead center."

"Any suggestions?"

"Maybe we should start the program without their direct input and once we get points on the board, they'll come along."

"You mean we develop the central contact list, the brochures and digital content?"

“Yes.”

Changra pointed out that it couldn't be done without the direct participation of partners and principals.

“We can't do the list, I agree. But, we can start brochures and digital content.”

“How do we do that without input?”

“We know enough about the firm to guess. If we put something down, the partners only have to comment on what they want changed.”

“And, how do we get them to comment?”

“Let's worry about that when we get to it.”

It seemed useless but Changra agreed to try. He used the firm's old brochures to write copy for new ones that updated language and philosophy. He drafted copy for the web page. He produced a sample blog. He researched a detailed list of media to whom blog entries would be sent to spark story ideas. He developed a Twitter program and the first 25 tweets. He researched industry meetings where partners could speak and developed a list of speech ideas. He detailed a topics list for a first annual conference for customers and transaction partners that would discuss the state of the industry and position the firm as an expert. In two weeks, Changra had completed the package, and the general manager scheduled a meeting with the senior partners.

Changra worried the partners would consider the agency's work unnecessary and arrogant. Even if they didn't, there was no guarantee the general manager could get the partners to read and comment on copy. He needed strong arguments for the agency's action and even stronger arguments to get the partners off dead center.

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Questions for discussion:

1. Frame arguments for validating the agency's work.
2. Frame arguments for getting the partners to move.
3. Would you have taken the decision that the agency general manager took?
4. If you were in Changra's place over the nine months, what would you have done?