

There's a Lion Over There by Charles Wendel

"There's a lion over there," my son, Sam, said calmly, as we sat around a fire enjoying cocktails and canapés at the Mana Pools safari camp in Zimbabwe. When we turned around and stood up in reaction to his comment (which we thought was some sort of joke), about 15 feet away from us we saw... a lion. In fact it was the male lion we had take pictures of 30 minutes before as he was resting in the middle of a road that lead to our camp. The lion immediately ran away when we stood up. Sam commented, "We scared him!" despite the lion's ability to make us *his* cocktail canapés.

Our safari guide was not surprised at the lion's reaction and said afterwards that he knew we were in little danger from the inquisitive lion, the crocodiles jumping into the water near our tent, nor the hippos passing by our camp in the middle of the night. The safari guide had seen it all before and knew how to deal with any crisis. Our days with him and other guides increased our level of trust in them as they proved time after time that they knew their territory, knew how the animals would react, and would safely maneuver us through any potentially dangerous situations.

What's this got to do with banking? While bankers seldom deal with life and death situations, the best ones should and do have more in common with safari guides than one might initially think. Many bank customers also think "there's a lion over there," except the lion they need to deal with involves economic issues: a loan to maintain or grow their business, retirement planning that will afford them peace of mind, estate planning that allows them to pass on their wealth, and so forth. Many need advice and shepherding and would welcome their banker providing it. Too often, they look elsewhere.

Four elements combine to create the total trust we give to a guide; similar elements apply to a banker's relationship with his clients:

Expertise. The guide leading us in a canoe trip down the Zambezi River has made many similar trips over the years. He knew how close he could come to the hundreds of hippos in the water and provided us with a plan on how to deal with them if the situation got out of his control.

Proactivity. In the field, the guides lead us with clarity and precise instruction concerning what to do if a nearby elephant charged or, on the water, if the canoe capsized amidst hippos and crocs. The guides wanted to prepare us for any unpleasant surprises and instructed us on what to do.

Commitment to the client and passion for their work. The guides loved what they did, and they communicated their enthusiasm by their energy and focus on getting us to see animal, flora, and stars that we have never seen before or certainly

never seen before in their raw beauty. They focused totally on the client and the client experience.

No committees/no hype. Based on their experience and the respect they had earned over the years, the guides were self-reliant. No one (except for the occasional lion) was looking over their shoulder. Their managers (and they have them) take care of the paperwork so that the guides can focus on the customer's experience and survival. Of course, bankers have many rules they need to follow and will forever. What management needs to do is to actively limit non-client activities rather than allow more internal burdens to be placed on their main revenue producers. I see too many bank managers failing to limit their banker's paperwork and desk-bound activities.

Compare a safari guide's focus to what many bankers offer their clients:

The level of expertise is often inconsistent. Safari companies cannot afford to employ a mediocre guide for long. Being mediocre is acceptable at many banks.

Proactivity is frequently not the norm. The best bankers are a client's advisor. They understand their balance sheet as well as their business and owner needs. They anticipate rather than respond. But, honestly, what percentage of your bankers do this? I know a few banks in which those percentages would be very high, however, at most banks a relatively small number of bankers study their clients, anticipate their needs, and emphasize solutions rather than pitching products.

Given the amount of nonclient activity the line banker either chooses or is required to perform, the customer often has to fight for attention versus various internal and regulatory requirements. Does the client always come first? Too often the real answer is no. Safari guides definitely get out from behind their desks (they have none) to be with their clients. Bankers seem chained to their desks with customer calls something they do after they handle admin work.

Banks should create an operating environment that allows a banker to develop and emphasize the qualities the best safari guides possess. Instead, banks often undercut and discourage the proactivity, customer focus, enthusiasm, and commitment to excellence that a great guide possesses.

Banker commitment and passion is often hard to find. Internal oversight and an operating environment in which their role seems subservient to various staff groups have worn down many bankers.

Committees rule. The guide needs to make split second decisions; the banker needs to work within an increasingly Byzantine corporate structure that sometimes sucks their strength. This area is a major differentiator between banks. Some are enabling the banker to focus on the customer and "protecting" him from the internal

distractions that can fill up a banker's day. Those banks are rewarded with higher productivity and a happier client base.

Clients should view their bankers as leaders who can help they diagnose their needs and provide approaches to help and protect them. The type of respect and trust that safari guides engender should be every banker's goal.