

# hot potatoes

Serving every client with a sense of urgency

**I**t happens to me—and I’ll bet it happens to you—every day. I see folks who work much harder than the average person, and I ask myself, “What is it that drives these people to work as if their lives depend on it?”

It’s called a sense of urgency. If you’re in the client service business, you may already recognize the importance of doing business with a sense of urgency—especially in a down economy. If not, then it’s time for a wake up call.

In retail, Nordstrom raised the bar for department store customer service. In the hotel business, Four Seasons is known for going the extra mile to make guests happy.

In our Web-driven society, people are multitasking like never before, and they are cramming more productivity into less time. Customers need exceptional service and they need it exceptionally fast. When it comes to customer retention, your responsiveness is often the deciding factor for success.

## Urgency and Your Brand

Sense of urgency can be a powerful branding tool. At Boscobel, working with a sense of urgency is deeply engrained in the fabric of our business.

More than 25 years ago, we went through an internal branding process aimed at defining the company’s key personality traits. We asked our employees, clients and consultants, “Thinking of Boscobel as a person, rather than as a business, what one word would you use to describe it?” Based on the feedback we received, we came up with the five key attributes of our brand: passionate, creative, thorough, responsive and fun.

Seizing this brand-building opportunity, we used the “responsive” attribute of our brand as the platform for a new approach to client service called Sense of Urgency Service (SOUS). The SOUS approach, in a

nutshell, requires that we treat every client project like a hot potato—and it’s been part of our business model ever since.

SOUS starts with being responsive—make that super-responsive. One of the operating principles of SOUS is that no client will ever be kept waiting. Whether a client is large or small, somebody from the team must respond to a client’s phone or e-mail request within the hour, and typically, response times are less than 15 minutes. If you don’t have the answer, you must still respond to the customer within that one-hour window to let him or her know you’ve “got the ball”, and indicate when you will have the information requested. We call that the “placeholder” email.

But SOUS goes deeper than response times. It means taking on your client’s priorities—their goals, their deadlines, their metrics, their worries—and making them your own. It means moving quickly and decisively to meet your client’s needs, and keeping them updated on every move you make, so the client never has to ask you what is going on. But more than that, it means going beyond the call of duty. It’s a “total solutions” package.

## Always Ahead of the Game

In the long run, SOUS requires a proactive approach to every phase of the client relationship. In sports, it’s often said that you don’t need to be where the ball is—you need to be where the ball is going.

Likewise in a service business, you should aim for where your client is going. For instance, if you know that your client has a status meeting with their boss on a certain day of the week, you give them an update on your activities the day before. Or, if something goes wrong, you inform the client immediately instead of sitting on the problem until it’s too late.

Here’s a quick PR example: our client’s name was misspelled in a major publication. Fortunately, our PR team was watching for this article. Within minutes of the story appearing, the team leader alerted the client and set a plan in motion.

First, we didn’t just bring the client a problem; we also brought a solution—how we were going to approach the editor to point out the error and, arrange for a correction item to appear in the next issue. Then we continued to follow up and give the client frequent updates on our progress. At no time did the client have to come to us and say, “What’s happening with this?”

The SOUS approach is about putting yourself in your clients’ shoes. Whether there’s a problem to be solved or good news to share, SOUS allows your clients to be prepared for that next impromptu meeting with the boss in the hallway.

## Pass the Hot Potato

Now more than ever, sense of urgency service is essential in maintaining customer loyalty and in growing your business. Demonstrating that you are more responsive and more proactive than competitors will attract and hold clients whether the economy is up or down.

We love it when a customer tells us, “You’re so responsive that we feel like we’re your only client.” This is the way every client should feel. So if you’re a client service company, ask yourself, “Am I passing the hot potato?”

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