

Accountants need to show their clients Valentine's love

By **STEPHEN HORVAT**
Special to the Business Journal

Valentine's Day is a time for romance. It's a time to show the people you love how much you care and how important they are in your life. For a lot of people, Valentine's Day is also a reminder that they should try to show their love and commitment throughout the year and not just every Feb. 14th.

For accountants, client relationships can be just like any other relationship. You need to nurture them, you need to work at them and sometimes you actually need to romance them to keep

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the relationships strong and growing. So this Valentine's Day, in addition to thinking about how to adore your significant other, consider the following tips to make sure you maintain long-lasting client relationships that are meaningful the whole year round.

- Send notes. It doesn't have to be a poem expressing your love for them, but accountants should maintain consistent communication with their clients throughout the year, whether it's a phone call, an email or a hand-written note.

Clients don't just want to hear from their accountant once a year at tax time. They're looking for a partner who keeps them current on their financial and tax situation and updates



them regularly. The smart accountant schedules time to meet in-person on a regular basis, to make sure clients feel the love.

- Try a new move. Most accountants already have at least a few scheduled times when they'll talk to or meet with their clients. But spontaneity can really spice up the relationship. Don't be afraid to call unexpectedly or pop-in to your clients' office if you happen to be in the area. It builds a stronger bond if a client believes that you've got them on your mind all the time.

- Really listen. In any good relationship, you have to be able to listen. For accountants, this means understanding their clients' wants and needs. Listen to their goals and concerns, and try to identify a way to help them achieve those goals in a way that makes them feel comfortable and secure. It's also important that you truly understand their business and how it works. Ask questions, and then pay attention to the answers.

- Tell the truth. Once you've listened to your clients' concerns, you have to give them sound advice. Be honest in your assessments.

You should be an important part of helping their business grow, not just crunching numbers and completing tax returns. The only way to do that is to be upfront with them with your professional opinion.

- Get personal. It's important to keep some professional distance, but getting to know a little bit more about a client on a personal level is a way to build the kind of relationship that will last for years.

Find out what their interests are and bring it up in conversation. If you know they've have a family, ask them how their children are doing.

Showing your client that you see



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them as a person and not just a source of income builds the foundation for a long-term relationship and not just a fling.

- Be funny. Men and women like partners that can make them laugh. So do clients. A client's balance sheet can be serious business, but there's nothing wrong with injecting a little humor into the conversation. Don't be afraid to tell a joke or make light of a situation. It might help ease tension or concerns and lets clients see that you're not all business, all the time.

Relationships aren't easy. Ask almost any couple. But if both sides continually work at them, they're likely to be more successful in the end. That said, here's a message that accountants should understand when it comes to client relationships:

Doing little things throughout the year can lead to big returns at the year's end.

So this Valentine's Day, accountants and their clients should think about a relationship they often overlook because it's a relationship that really counts.

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CPA *Steve Horvat* is a partner in the *Small Business Services Group* at the accounting and business advisory firm, *ParenteBeard, LLC*. With more than 32 years of experience, *Horvat* is directly responsible for providing business planning, financial statements, tax returns, tax planning, information systems, and acts as a business advisor to small business clients.

RAIL

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2008, but are continuing to hire.

"They've got a lot of business and they need employees," said Kertesz.

Nationwide, Kertesz, who said railroads employ about 212,000 people, predicted that freight shipping by rail will continue to increase.

In a press release, The Association of American Railroads said it plans to invest \$13 billion in 2012 to expand, upgrade, and enhance the national freight rail network, with a projected 15,000 rail employees hired this year.