

# How Buyers Buy

ACCOUNTING & FINANCIAL SERVICES



HINGE

[www.hingemarketing.com](http://www.hingemarketing.com)

**How Buyers Buy: Accounting & Financial Services**

Copyright © 2013

**Published by Hinge Research Institute**

1851 Alexander Bell Drive, Suite 350

Reston, Virginia 20191

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under U.S. Copyright Act of 1946, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without prior written permission of the publisher.

Design by Hinge.

Visit our website at [www.hingemarketing.com](http://www.hingemarketing.com)

1   Introduction	4
2   Methodology	6
3   Finding Alternatives	8
4   Selecting a Firm	13
5   Working With a Firm	19
6   Expanding the Relationship	27
7   Getting Referrals	33
8   Understand Your Brand	40
9   Conclusion	44
Additional Resources	45
About Hinge	47
About RAIN Group	49

# 1

## Introduction

This study grew out of our long-standing commitment to understanding how to help professional services firms grow faster and become more profitable. We learned early in our research that a better understanding of your target clients was associated with higher growth and greater profitability.<sup>1</sup>

With this study we are digging deeper.

- It's a much larger study, with many more Buyers and deeper insights
- We also look at the Sellers, to learn how they see things differently than Buyers
- Additionally, we look at the results for each professional services industry, since buying patterns differ by industry
- Finally, we have partnered with RAIN Group, who specialize in sales, to share their new research on Buyers and add their perspective

This report focuses on Accounting and Financial Services firms and their clients. The timing couldn't be better.

Accounting and Financial Services firms are going through some major transitions and upheavals. From the rapid pace of baby boomer partners' retirement to massive regulatory reforms and the emergence of online marketing as a major source of new business, change seems to be everywhere.

<sup>1</sup> *Spiraling Up: How to Create a High Growth, High Value Professional Services Firm*. Hinge Research Institute, 2010. <<http://www.hingemarketing.com/spiralingup>>.



The timing  
couldn't be  
better.

How are all of these changes impacting Buyers? What is the best path to new business? What will drive your firm's growth and reputation? Those are just a few of the questions you are about to have answered.

Lee Frederiksen, Ph.D.  
*Managing Partner, Hinge*

### Find us online!

Twitter	<a href="#">@HingeMarketing</a>
Facebook	<a href="#">HingeMarketing</a>
LinkedIn	<a href="#">Hinge</a>
YouTube	<a href="#">HingeMarketing</a>



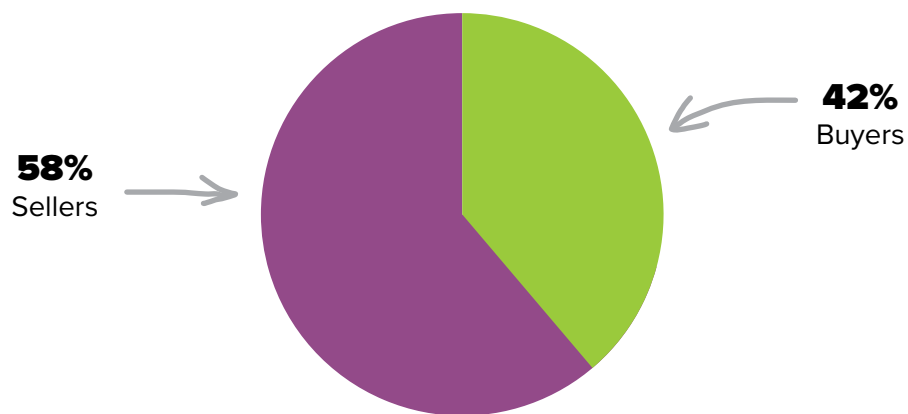
# 2

## Methodology

### The Sample

The study involved interviews with purchasers of Accounting and Financial Services (Buyers) and interviews or surveys of the firms that they selected (Sellers). A total of 281 subjects were included. The breakdown between Buyers and Sellers is shown in Figure 1.

**Fig. 1.** Accounting and Financial Services Sample Composition



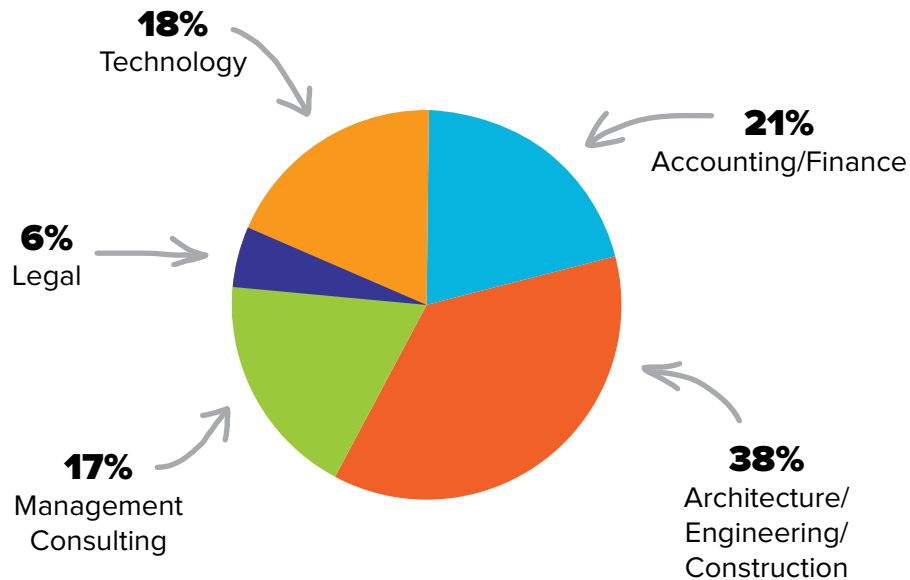
This sample was part of a larger study involving four other professional services industry groups. The overall study included 822 Buyers and 533 Sellers.

# 281

Buyers and  
Sellers were  
included.

The industry group composition is shown in Figure 2.

**Fig. 2.** Overall Study Industries Composition



## Interview Topics and Scoring

The interviews covered a wide range of topics relevant to the marketing process, including finding alternatives and selecting a firm, the working relationship, expanding opportunities, and growing the professional services brand.

Questions were of two types. The first type is open ended in which respondents answered in their own words. Responses were sorted into categories and are displayed as the percentage of respondents giving that answer. Since multiple responses were allowed, the cumulative total of responses typically exceeds 100%.

The second question format is a 0–10 rating scale. Responses are sorted into three behaviorally meaningful categories. A 9–10 rating signifies a strong endorsement of the behavior or emotion being rated. Ratings of 7–8 are persuadable and may be influenced in either direction. A 0–6 rating signifies a rejection of the behavior or emotion.



The interviews covered a wide range of topics relevant to the marketing process.

# 3

## Finding Alternatives

The process of finding a new Accounting or Financial Services provider starts with looking for alternatives. You must first get on the list.

### Building the List

About 15% of organizations have little flexibility and must follow a structured procurement process. Government entities are good examples.

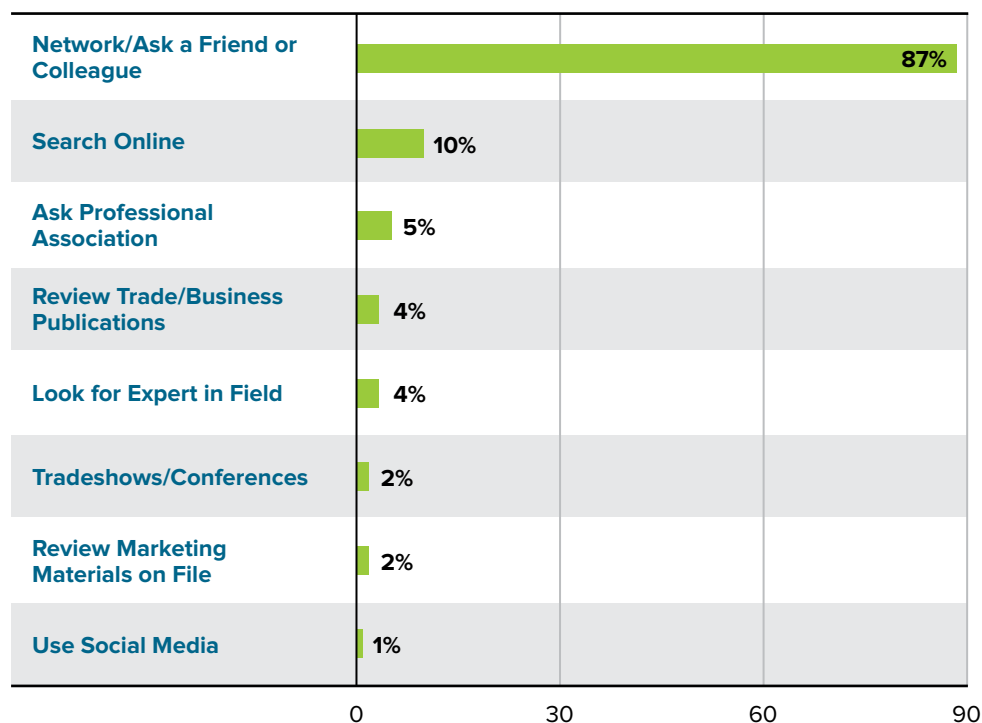
Another 16% feel that they already know all the alternatives that they need to consider. For the rest, their search for alternatives follows a pattern shown in Figure 3.

# 87%

of Buyers turn to friends or colleagues first.

Fig. 3. Finding Alternative Providers

Buyers



The second most popular response is to search online.



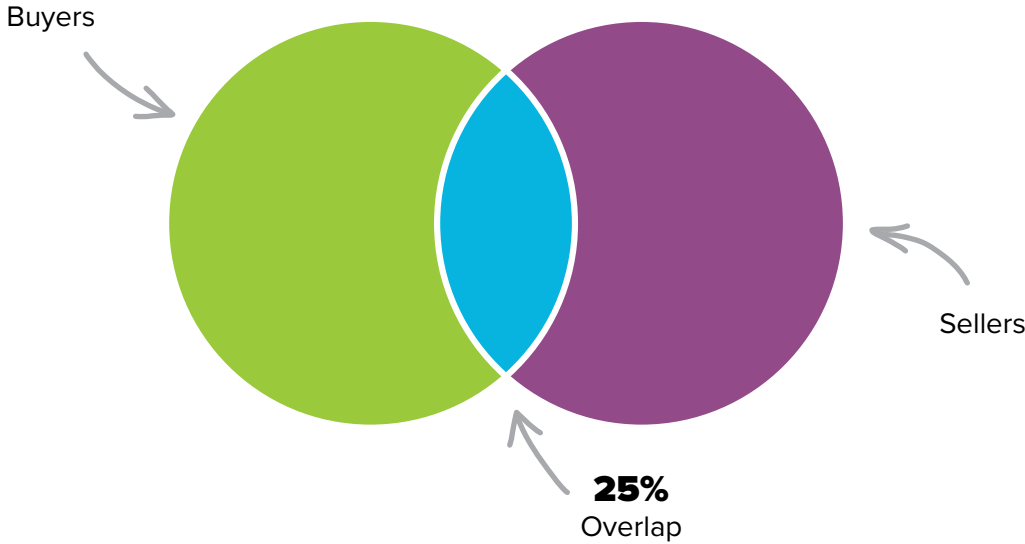
87% of Buyers turn first to friends or colleagues. Who does this kind of work? How well known is the firm? How good is their reputation? This clearly demonstrates the need for a good reputation and high visibility. In other words, a strong brand.

The second most popular response is to search online. This is a very important trend that many firms aren't aware of or dismiss out of hand. In fact, online search is already more popular than traditional channels such as trade shows or industry publications.

### The Competition

How well do you know who your real competition is? For most firms the answer is "Not so well." Figure 4 shows what happened when we asked Buyers and Sellers to identify competitors of their incumbent firm.

Fig. 4. Buyer vs. Seller Identified Competitors



The two competitor lists overlapped by only 25%. Put another way, 75% of the competitors that Buyers identified were not even considered to be competitors by the Sellers and vice versa. For most firms there is not a clear set of competitors. So how do you increase your chances of making the list?



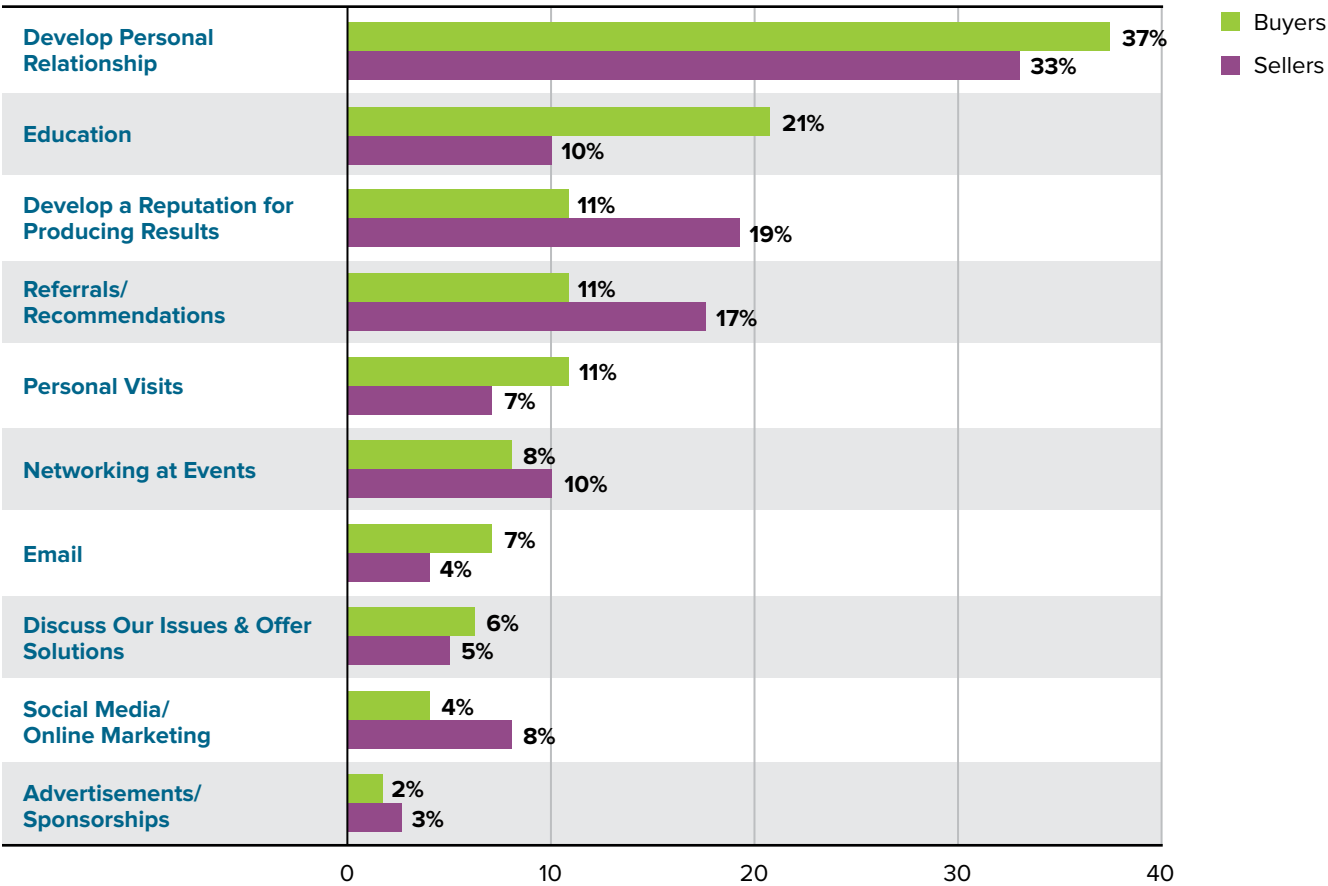
# 75%

of the competitors that the Buyers identified were not even considered to be competitors by the Sellers.

## Best Marketing Approaches

What is the best way to reach the Accounting and Financial Services Buyer? We asked both groups what they thought would work best. The results are shown in Figure 5.

Fig. 5. Best Way to Market to Buyers



In many situations Buyers and Sellers see the value of an approach quite similarly. For example, both Buyers and Sellers appreciate a good personal relationship.

There were a few notable exceptions, however. Buyers were twice as likely as Sellers to view education as a preferred approach. Sellers thought Buyers were more likely to value developing a reputation for results and referrals/recommendations as approaches to marketing.

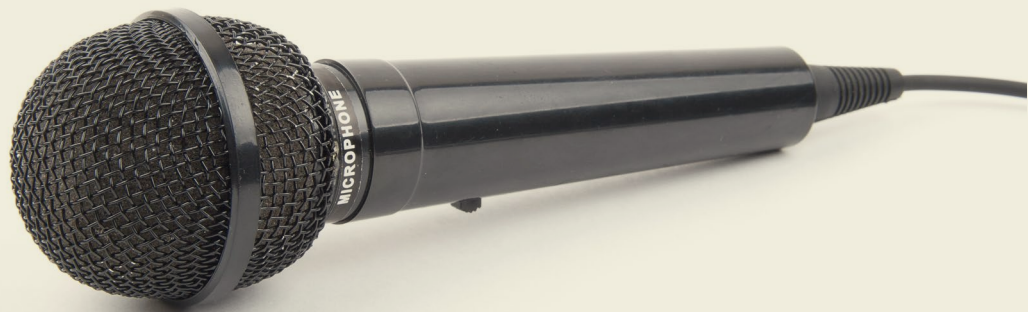
## ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

# All Good Things (Like Clients) Do Not Come to Those Who Wait...

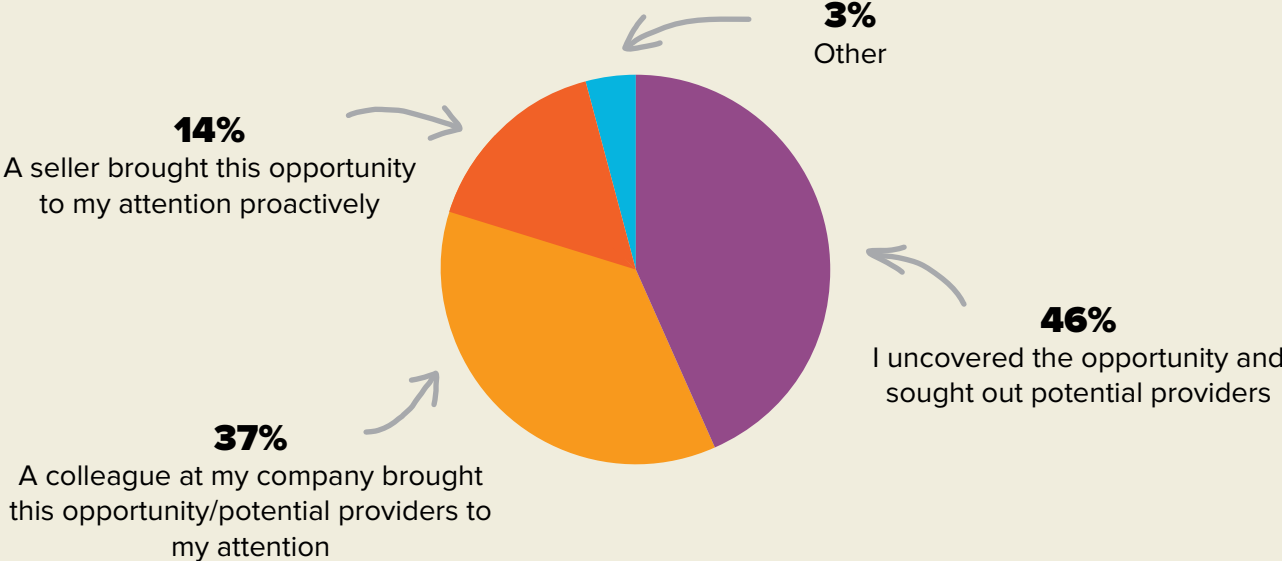
In all too many Professional Services firms, marketing and building awareness are usually put on the back burner. Why? Because the noticeable returns from marketing take so long that most Professional Services companies do not have the patience or fortitude to stick with consistent marketing over the long term.



In RAIN Group's 2013 research into the buying side of Professional Services firms, we asked 705 buyers a series of questions about Professional Services assignments in which they had engaged in the last year. When asked who brought the opportunity to their attention, 83% stated that they had either uncovered the opportunity themselves and then sought out a provider, or a colleague in their company had brought the opportunity and the provider to their attention. Only 14% of the time did buyers remember the provider bringing the opportunity proactively to the buyer.



How did this purchase opportunity come to your attention?



Of course, while this may be an indictment of providers’ unwillingness to get out and prospect, it is also an indication that if you want buyers to pick up the phone and call you, you had better let them know you exist in the first place through many of the marketing approaches sited throughout this report.

*RAIN Group*

# 4

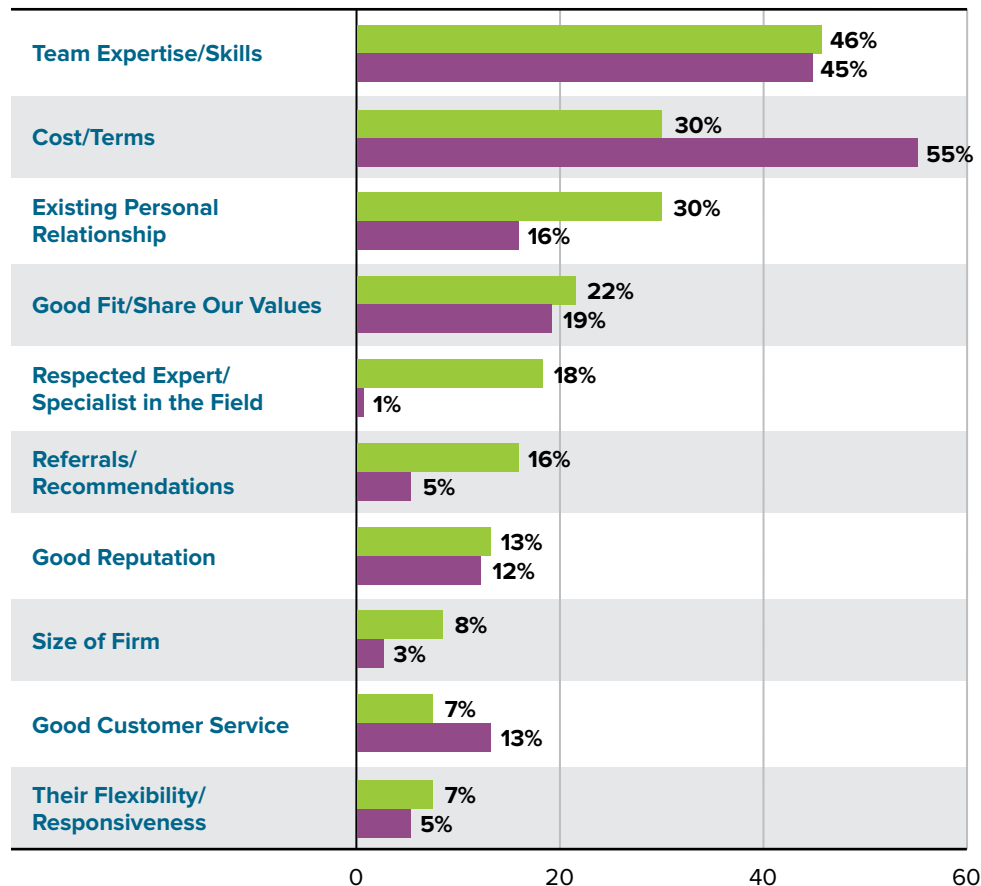
## Selecting a Firm

How do Buyers choose which firm they will work with? How accurate are Sellers' perceptions of the selection criteria? These are the questions we tackle next.

### Selection Criteria

The top ten Buyer selection criteria are shown in Figure 6.

Fig. 6. Top 10 Buyer Selection Criteria



Buyers  
Sellers

Sellers overestimate the importance of cost and customer service as primary selection criteria.

Accounting and Financial Services Buyers are looking first for the right skills and team expertise. Sellers see it the same way.

Sellers overestimate the importance of cost and customer service as primary selection criteria. They underestimate the role that existing relationships, referrals and recommendations play.

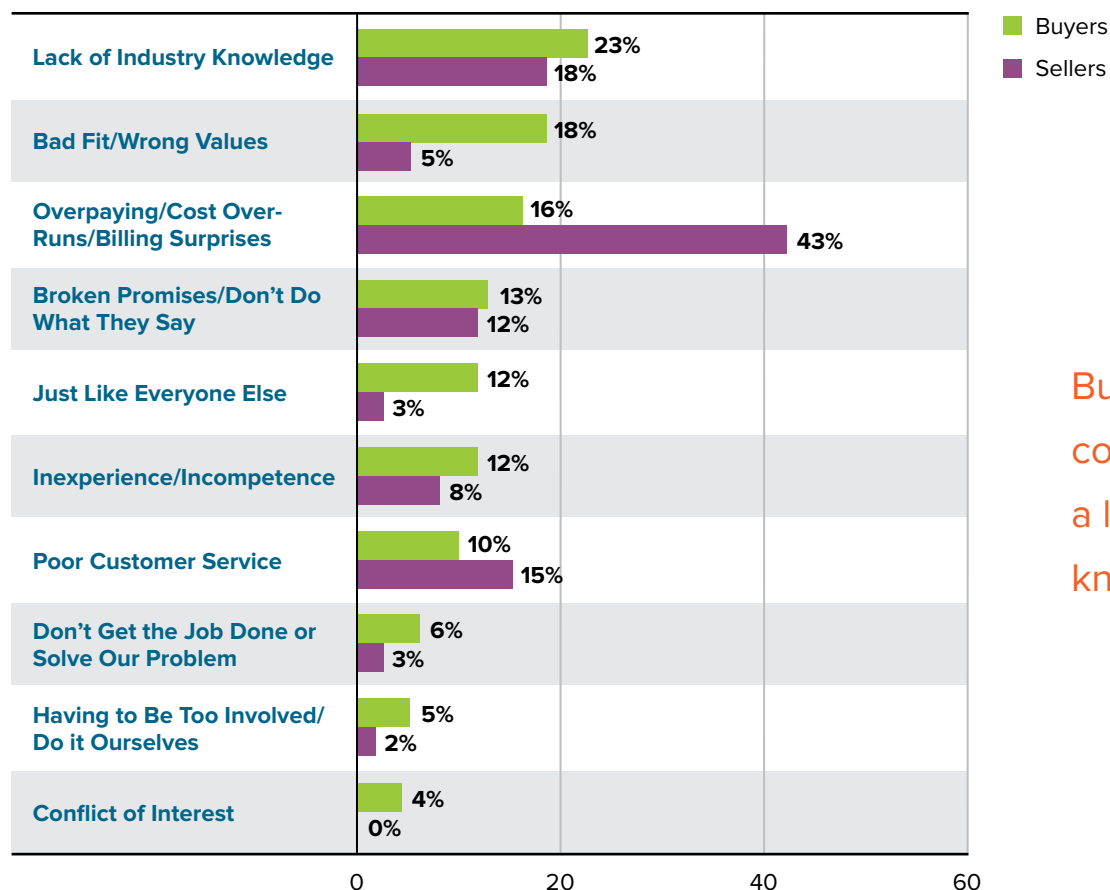
Sellers often fail to recognize the value of being a respected expert or specialist.

Sellers often fail to recognize the value of being a respected expert or specialist.

### What Buyers Want to Avoid

The previous question focuses on what Buyers are looking for in an Accounting or Financial Services firm. In Figure 7, we turn the question around and look at what they are trying to avoid.

Fig. 7. What Buyers Want to Avoid



Buyers are most concerned about a lack of industry knowledge.

Buyers are most concerned about a lack of industry knowledge. A poor cultural fit is the second most frequent concern. The cultural fit concern is not well recognized by Sellers. Another blind spot is the Buyer’s concern about the firm they select being “just like everyone else.”

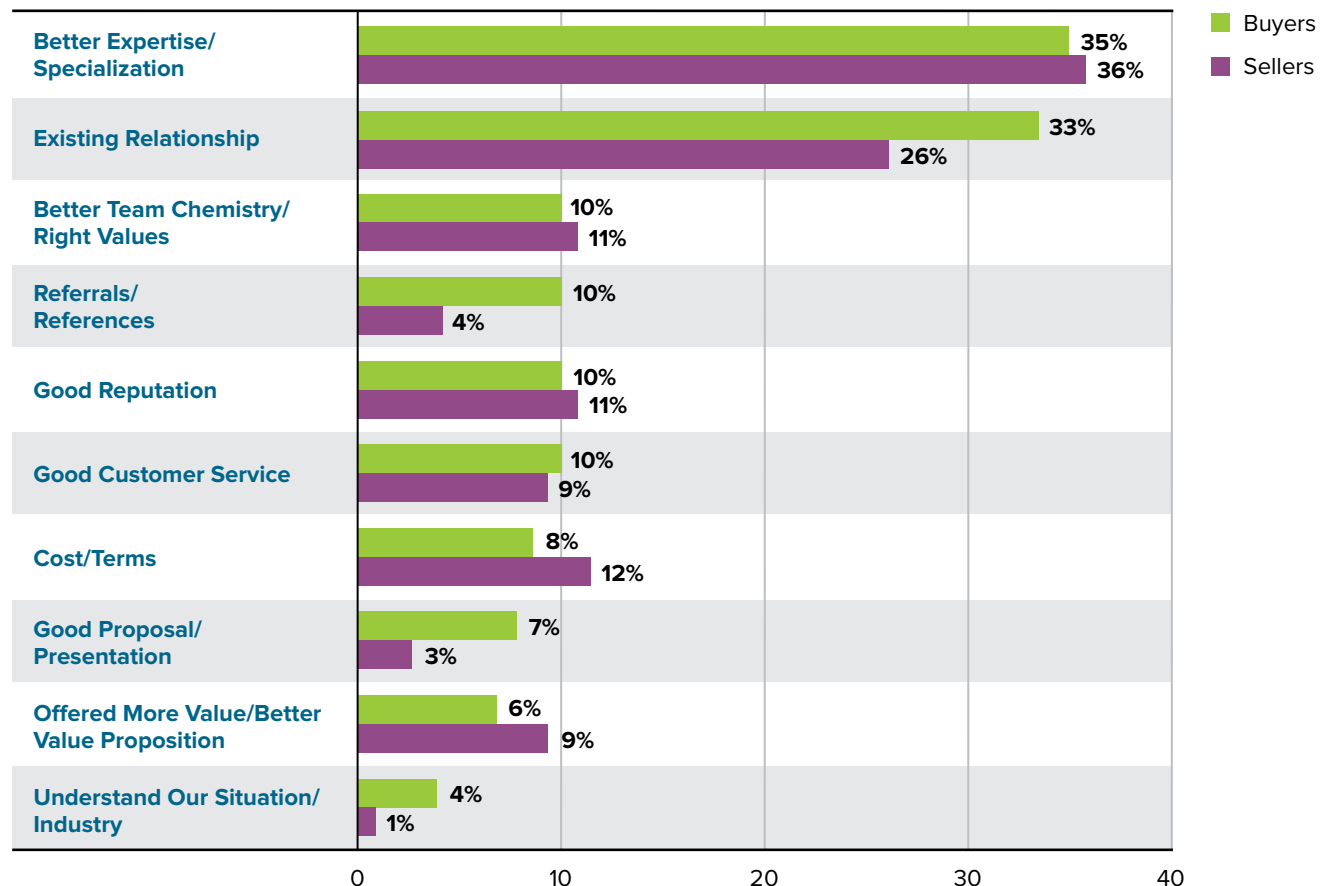
Sellers massively exaggerate Buyers’ concern about cost over-runs and pricing. They also overplay the importance of customer service, but by a much smaller margin.

Sellers massively exaggerate Buyers’ concern about cost over-runs and pricing.

### What Tips the Scale?

We know what Buyers are looking for and what they are trying to avoid. But when it gets down to the final selection, what is the deciding factor? Those results are shown in Figure 8.

Fig. 8. What Tips the Scale?



For Buyers of Accounting and Financial Services the answer is clear. Better expertise or specialization is the top deciding factor. An existing relationship comes in a close second. Think of it as the incumbent's advantage.

In fact, expertise/specialization and existing relationships are approximately 4X more likely to be the deciding factor than are cost or a better value proposition.

**If you want to unseat an incumbent you are more likely to do it through specialization/expertise than through lower price.**

Another important insight is around the proposal itself. Sellers underestimate the impact of references and a well-written, well-presented proposal.

**Better expertise or specialization is the top deciding factor.**



## ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

# I Just Awarded that Assignment...

We recently conducted customer research for a client on how often their past clients wish to be contacted by their professional service providers. Like most service providers, our client's hypothesis was that his past clients would simply call when they have more work. Like many providers, his assumption was that contacting past clients too often would be an intrusion, an imposition, and, worst of all, unprofessional.



As a result, he was following the once a year (or less) approach to “staying in touch.”

Our research findings, in keeping with what we have witnessed time and time again, were:

Almost no service providers contact  
their current and past clients too often.  
In fact, this is difficult to do.



A typical conversation with past clients of ours would go something like this:

- I am calling for Smith & Jones. Bill Smith did some work for you in the past and I am looking to find out the best ways for him to keep in touch with you in order to stay top of mind.
- How is Bill? I remember the work he did for us. Oh gee, it's been over a year now. How time flies. His approach was so unlike anything we usually get. He was thoughtful, asked great questions, and actually changed what we were looking for. In the end, his suggestions made a huge difference for us.
- Bill is doing great.
- Good to hear that. You know, I had forgotten about how good his work was. Too bad you didn't call last week. I just awarded a major assignment that was right up Bill's alley. I am so busy right now. I have trouble remembering things from last week, let alone last year. The assignment came up and I called who I met with most recently. They were in two weeks ago. Too bad for both of us, Bill probably would have been a great choice. Tell him to give me a call soon.

Don't be afraid to pick up the phone or go visit your clients once in a while. They really want you to.

*RAIN Group*

# 5

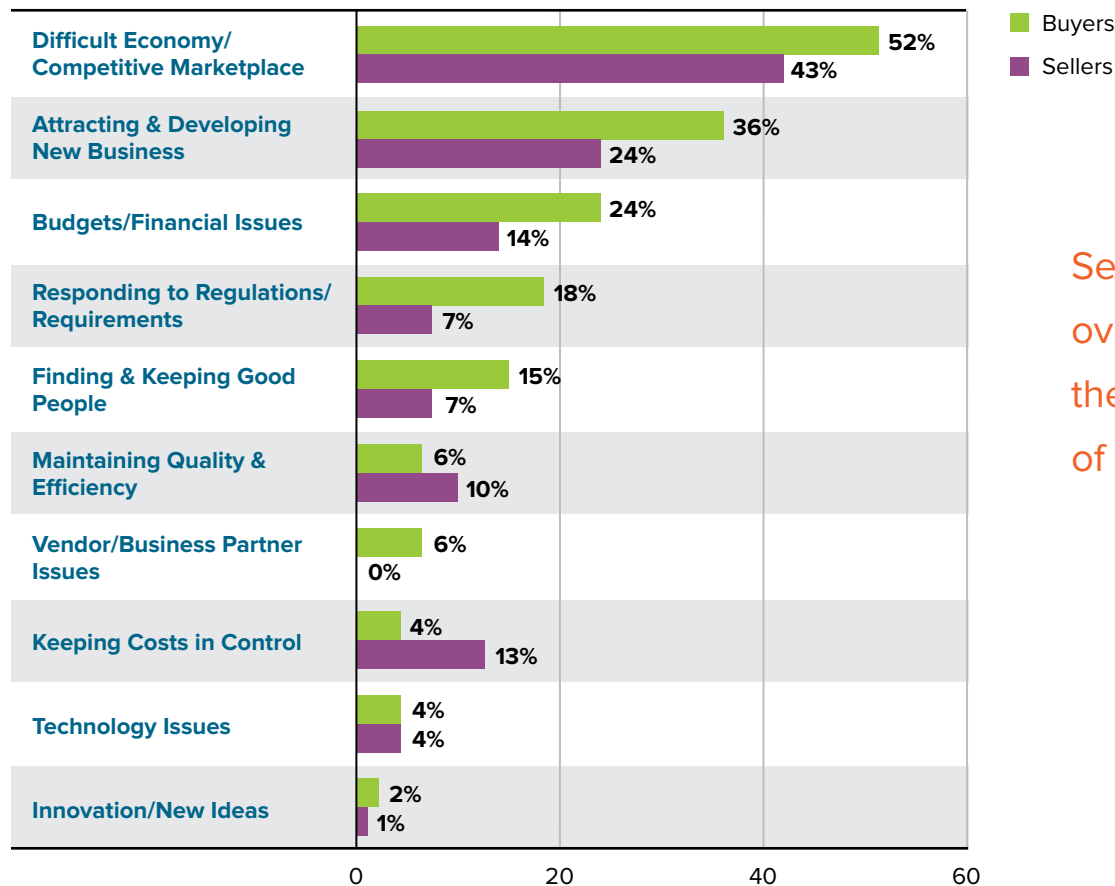
## Working With a Firm

You've won the new client. Now it's time to forge a good working relationship. How can you ensure that they will remain a client well into the future? Let's start by examining your relevance to Buyers' key priorities.

### Key Challenges and Priorities

We asked Accounting and Financial Services Buyers to identify their key organizational challenges and priorities. The top ten results are shown in Figure 9.

Fig. 9. Buyers' Key Challenges/Priorities



Sellers overestimated the importance of cost control.

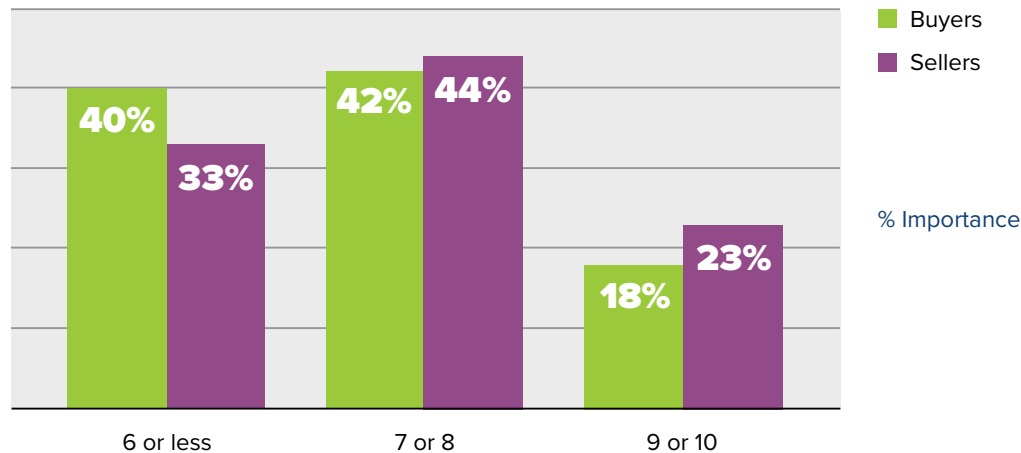
It should not surprise anyone that dealing with a difficult economy and competitive environment topped the list of challenges. Somewhat surprisingly, most of the Buyers' concerns were underestimated by Sellers.

Sellers overestimated the importance of cost control. This was also true, although to a lesser extent, with maintaining quality and efficiency.

There were also some significant blind spots in areas where Accounting and Financial Services firms are well positioned to add value. Sellers underestimated the importance of budget and regulatory requirement issues.

How important are Accounting and Financial Services firms to addressing Buyers' key challenges? Figure 10 shows Buyers' and Sellers' ratings.

**Fig. 10.** Importance of Sellers' Service to Addressing Buyers' Challenges



Only 18% of Buyers rated Sellers' services as very important to addressing their challenges. This is an important missed opportunity. Sadly, 40% saw them as not being very relevant.

The good news is that 42% are still in the persuadable range (rating of 7 or 8) where the case for increased importance might be successfully made through Sellers' efforts.

Sellers tend to see their services as more important than their Buyers do. Perhaps this arises from a misunderstanding of Buyers' true priorities that we saw in the previous figure.

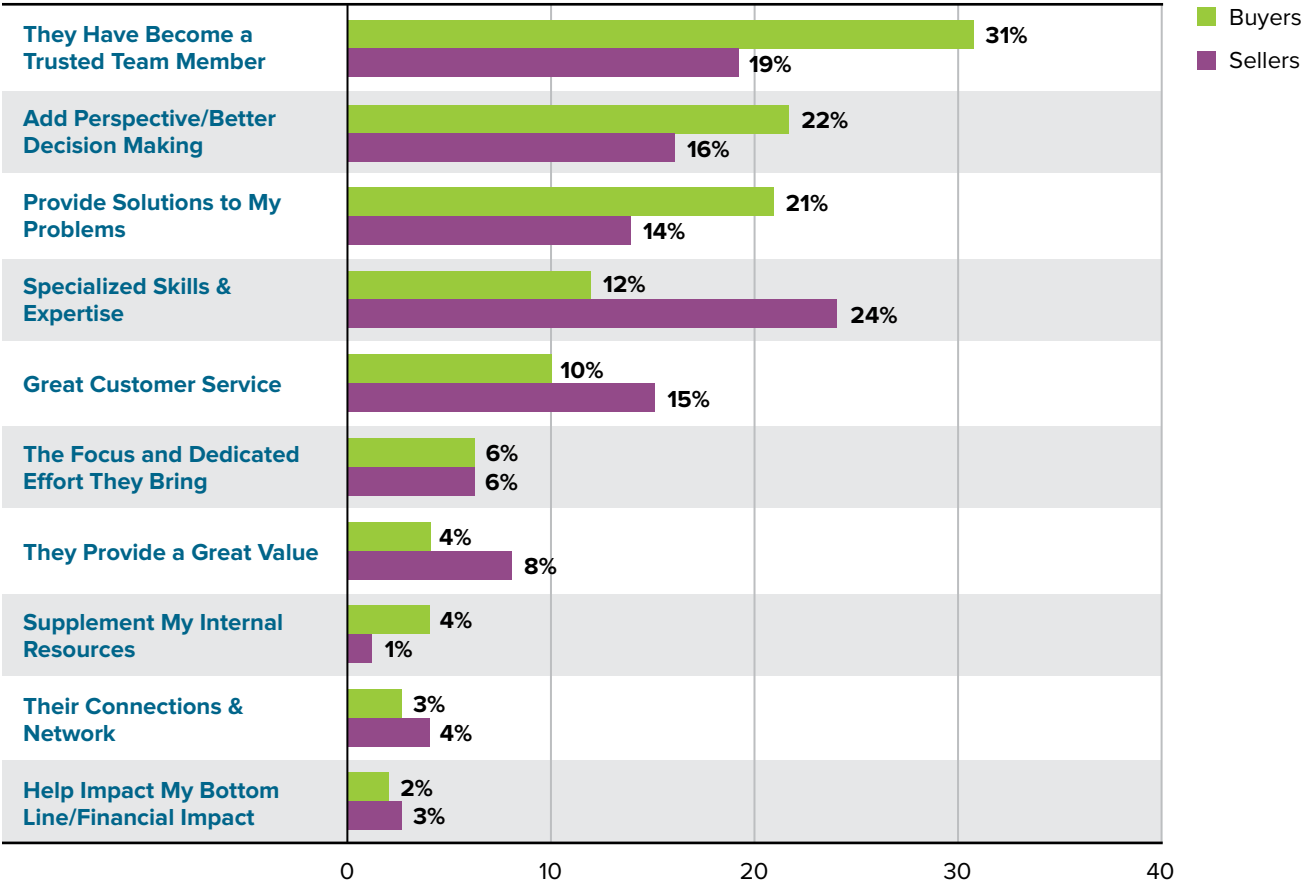
Sellers underestimated the importance of budget and regulatory requirement issues.

Sellers tend to see their services as more important than their Buyers do.

## Real Value or Benefit to Buyer

What do Buyers see as the real benefit or value that they receive from Sellers? The responses to this question are shown in Figure 11.

Fig. 11. Real Value or Benefit to Buyers



The addition of a trusted team member is the most frequent benefit to Buyers. About a third of the time this is not recognized by Sellers. Sellers also underappreciate their own perspective and problem solving skills.

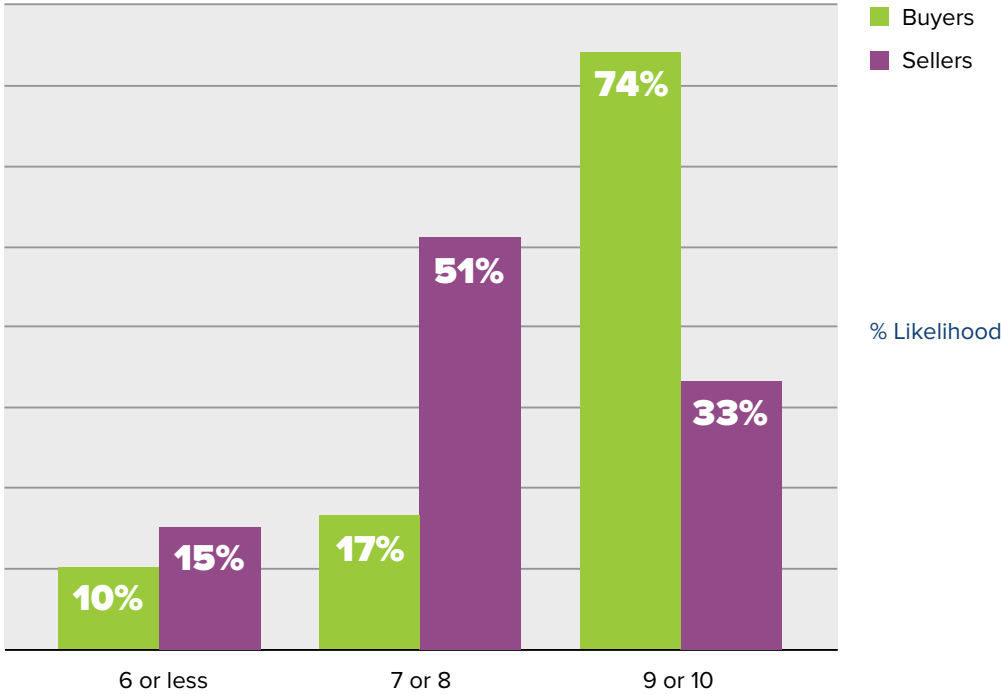
Sellers believe their main benefit is specialized skills and expertise, delivered with great customer service and at a fair price. But, in many cases, what Sellers are selling is not what Buyers value. Sellers are selling services. Buyers value advice and solutions from a trusted team member.

What Sellers are selling is not what Buyers value.

## Do Sellers Do What They Say They Will?

To what extent do Sellers deliver on their promises? Are they following through on their promises? Figure 12 presents the results.

Fig. 12. Do Sellers Do What They Say They Will?



Sellers are much harder on themselves than their clients are.

From Buyers’ perspective the answer seems to be a resounding “yes.”

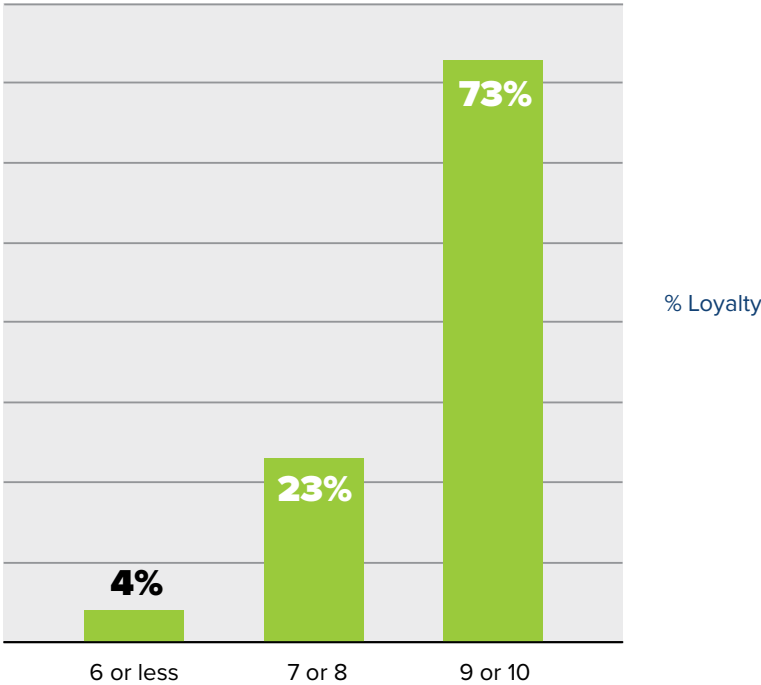
A commanding 74% of Buyers strongly believe Sellers do what they promise. Only 10% disagree.

But there is a huge perception gap. Sellers are much harder on themselves than their clients are. Only 33% of Sellers strongly believe they will do what they say they will, while 74% of Buyers believe they do.

## Buyer Loyalty

Figure 13 shows how this all translates into Buyer Loyalty.

**Fig. 13.** Buyer Loyalty Rating Over 2-3 Years



About a quarter of Buyers are in the persuadable range.

Buyers were asked to rate the probability that they would still be using the firm in 2–3 years.

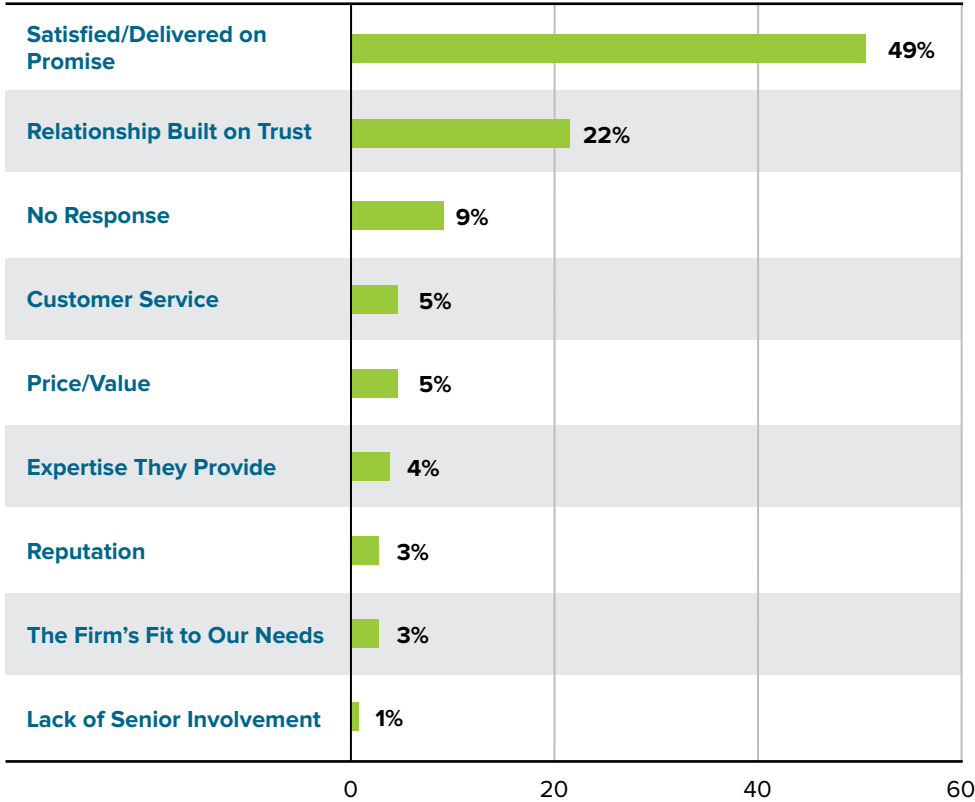
In this sample, 73% of Buyers thought that there was a very high probability (9 or 10 rating) that they would still be with the same firm in 2–3 years. Only 4% were expecting to change.

From a business development perspective, this data suggests that many opportunities exist. About a quarter of Buyers are in the persuadable range.

## Factors Influencing Loyalty

We then asked Buyers to identify those factors influencing their rating. The results are shown in Figure 14.

Fig. 14. Factors Influencing Buyer Loyalty



Delivering on your promises is the single best predictor of client loyalty.

Delivering on your promise (49%) and trust (22%) are the two most significant loyalty drivers. Interestingly, price/value and client service account for only about 5% each.

Winning a new client involves different factors than maintaining loyalty. Industry knowledge, reputation, and expertise win new clients. Delivering on your promises is the single best predictor of client loyalty.



## ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

# Clients Are Waiting. It's Your Move.

Service providers often lament the difficulty of unseating an incumbent service provider. The switching data continues to suggest that business is out there for the taking. As advisors to professional services firms, we wholeheartedly agree as we continue to observe significant openness on behalf of buyers to entertain discussions on switching to new service providers.

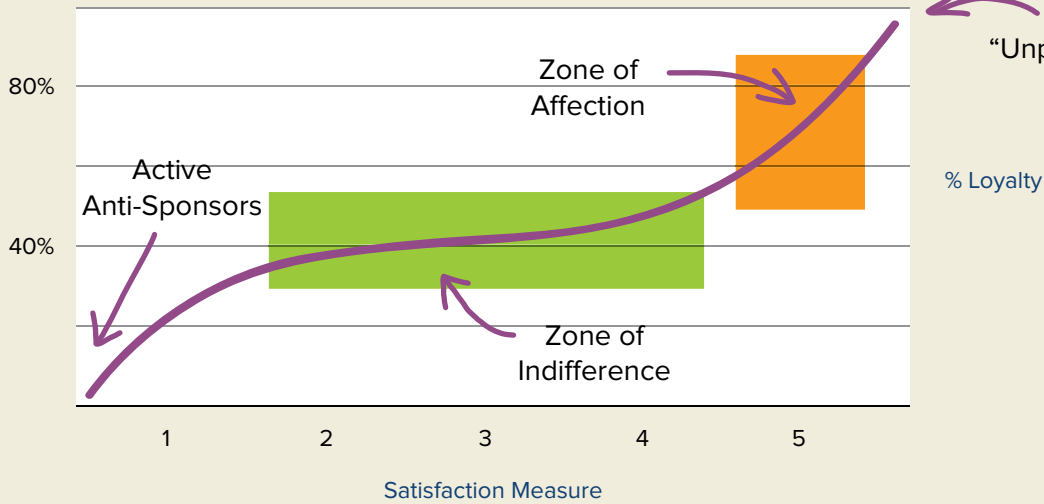


However, most of these decision makers are not going to be persuaded easily to switch providers. While potential clients may be willing—even itching—to switch, in our experience, service providers are often unwilling or unable to do what they must do to initially engage new prospects and then win their business. For the service provider willing to make the effort, the business is out there for the taking.

On the flip side, Accounting and Financial Services firms must monitor their own clients as to how excited they are about the value provided. As we have seen over the years through our research into client satisfaction and client loyalty, merely keeping the customer satisfied does not ensure loyalty.



A Very Satisfied Client is Very Loyal



A "5" is six times more loyal than a "4."

A very satisfied client is very loyal, but if you don't "wow" your client, you can be the one wondering how you were unseated as the incumbent.

*RAIN Group*

# 6

## Expanding the Relationship

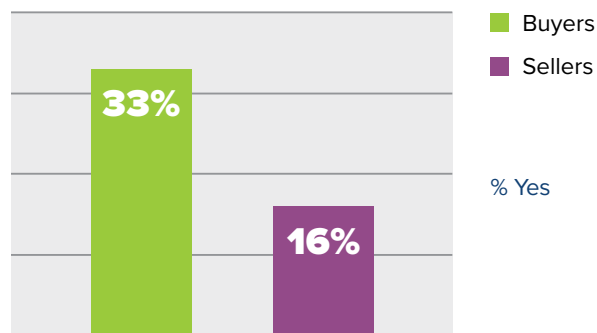
How do you go about expanding the client relationship beyond the scope of services you are currently providing? Some business developers think of this as cross-selling.

Of course, the roots of a strategy are already apparent in the previous analysis of **Buyer Loyalty**. And likely areas for additional services are to be found in **Buyers' Key Challenges and Priorities** discussed earlier. But let's look at the process of turning Buyers' needs into new business.

### Buyer Awareness of Seller Services

If your clients are happy with the services you are providing, won't they naturally turn to you when they have a need that you can help them with? Figure 15 begins to answer that question.

**Fig. 15.** Are Buyers Aware of the Services Sellers Offer?



A big part of the challenge is obvious from the results. Fully two thirds of Buyers admit that they do not know all the services Sellers provide. That's the best case. Sellers believe that 84% of Buyers are unaware of how they can help them. Assume that your Buyers will not know how you can help them.

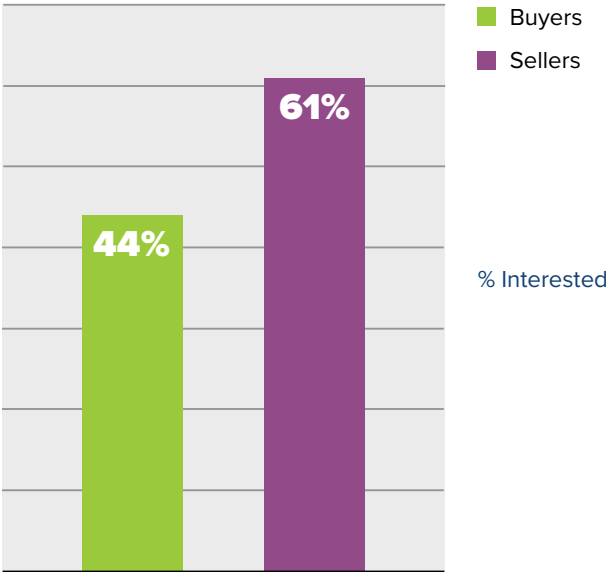


Assume that your Buyers will not know how you can help them.

## Buyer Interest in New Services

Are your Buyers interested in additional services from your firm? In this sample, over 44% of Buyers said that they were interested in additional services from Sellers.

Fig. 16. Buyers Interested in New Services from Sellers



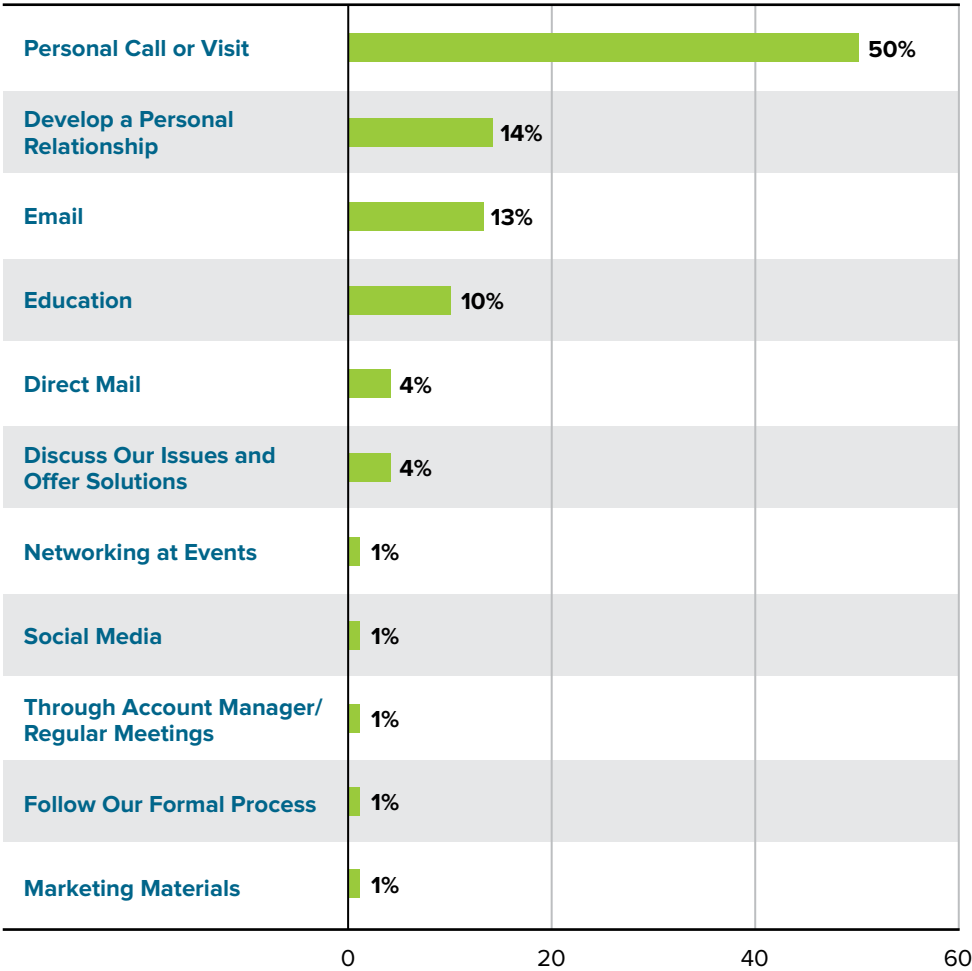
**44%**  
of Buyers said that they were interested in additional services from Sellers.

It's interesting to note that Sellers tend to overestimate the needs of existing clients.

## How to Offer New Services

If you assume, as you must, that the Buyers do not know how you can help them with their needs, the burden then shifts to you, the Seller. Buyers' recommendations about how to approach this task are shown in Figure 17.

Fig. 17. Best Way to Offer New Services to Buyers



**50%**  
of Buyers want a personal call or visit to discuss new business.

From this figure, the results are clear. A personal approach is preferred. 50% of Buyers want a personal call or visit to discuss new business. An additional 14% suggest developing a personal relationship before offering more services. Educational efforts are preferred by 10% of Buyers.

While these findings offer a clear path with existing Buyers, how do you move to new Buyers? That's where referrals become important.

## ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

# Building Relationships One Executive at a Time

*“It’s impossible to get serious face time with senior executives.”*

*“Even getting 15 minutes with a senior executive can take 15 months.”*



We hear things like this all the time from providers who want to get more time with decision makers, but haven’t yet cracked the code.

Let’s start by setting a few things straight:

1. It’s not impossible to get serious face time with senior executives.
2. Getting serious face time with senior executives doesn’t need to take forever.
3. The code is crackable.

It’s a common misconception that senior executives don’t have time. Based on extensive research in the area, we are prepared to reveal a startling fact: Decision makers have 24 hours in each day, and a statistically significant number of them manage these days in bundles of seven called a week.

Shocking! But true: 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

What may actually be interesting is how they spend this time. They don’t meet only with internal colleagues, they don’t meet only in 15-minute blocks, and they don’t disappear into the nights and weekends to spend extended time only with their families.

Many executives pour their time into meetings and relationships. In our research, executives often cite that their relationships with people across companies and industries – colleagues, partners, and “vendors” alike – are essential to their success.

They have long meetings with people outside their organizations. They have breakfast meetings, lunch meetings, and dinner meetings. They ski, fish, take in games, and go to the ballet. They maintain relationships over time.

They are, indeed, doing all of these things and more. The question is this: Why aren't they doing them with you?

Through a decade of research, we've learned that the best relationship developers get extended time with senior executives when they do the following:

- 1. Establish a peer dynamic:** Under no circumstances should you come across as inferior to a senior executive. It does mean you must have confidence in the value you can offer from a business perspective, and confidence in yourself personally that the C-suite is where you should be.
- 2. Resonate on the business side:** Often people don't understand what's going to be important to senior executives.

The higher up you get, the more you'll find people who are looking for business growth, innovation, and competitive advantage. Executives seek ideas that will be “the next big thing” for their business and their agenda. Bring these ideas to the table and you'll be on your way.

- 3. Resonate personally, emotionally:** Never forget that senior executives are people, just like you. They have emotions and personal interests. CEOs have kids, like sports, want to be seen as successful, are passionate about politics, and want to retire, drink fruity drinks with umbrellas, and read CIA thrillers.



4. **Don't give up:** Initially, it might take a while to get discussions with senior executives. Don't give up. Those who make it to the top are dogged about getting there.
5. **Craft a meticulous personal brand:** Getting quality, extended time with senior executives is all about being invited to the inner circle. Make no mistake, you will be judged as to whether or not you deserve to be there. Create a reputation as a known expert in your area.

Ultimately, if you want time and relationships with executives, you have to make sure they see you in their league. It's up to you to do what you can to get there and stay there.

*RAIN Group*



# 7

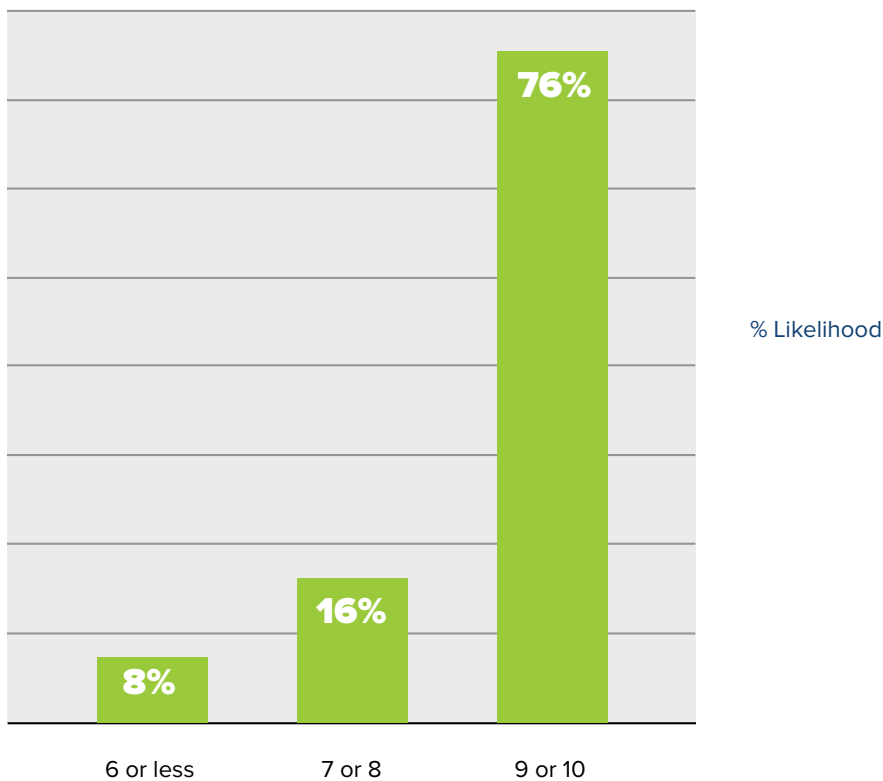
## Getting Referrals

How can you benefit from referrals from your existing clients? Let's first examine the potential for referrals.

### Referral Potential

Figure 18 shows the Buyers' rating of the probability that they would recommend Sellers to friends or colleagues.

**Fig. 18.** Probability Buyer Would Recommend Seller



Overall 76% of Buyers are very likely to recommend Sellers (rating 9 or 10). Only 8% are unlikely to recommend.

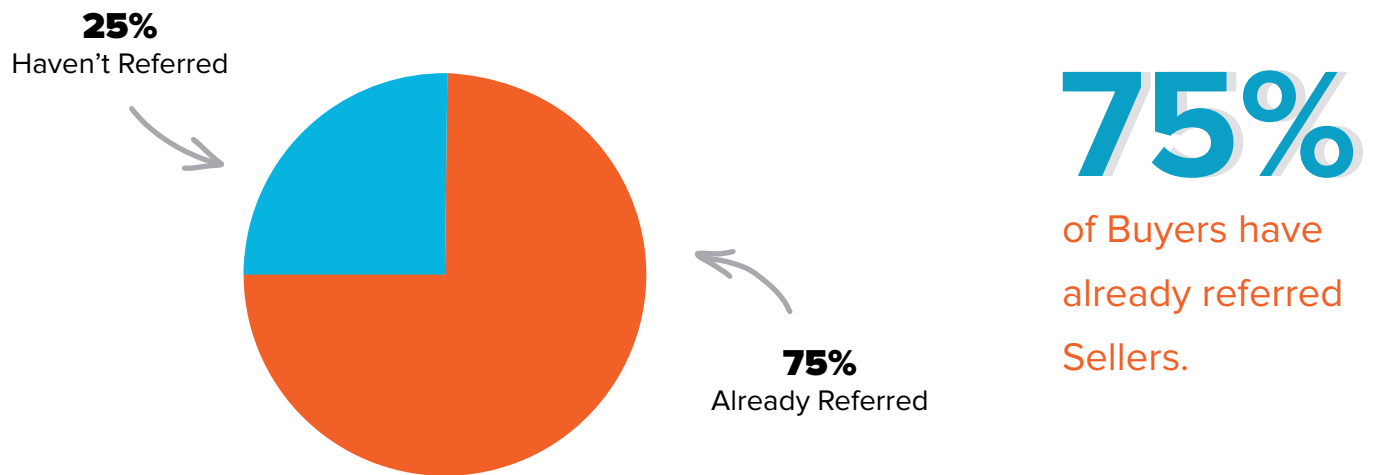
# 76%

of Buyers are very likely to recommend Sellers.

## Referral Behavior

Buyers' actual referral behavior corresponds quite well with referral potential. 75% of Buyers have already referred Sellers.

Fig. 19. Buyers' Actual Referrals

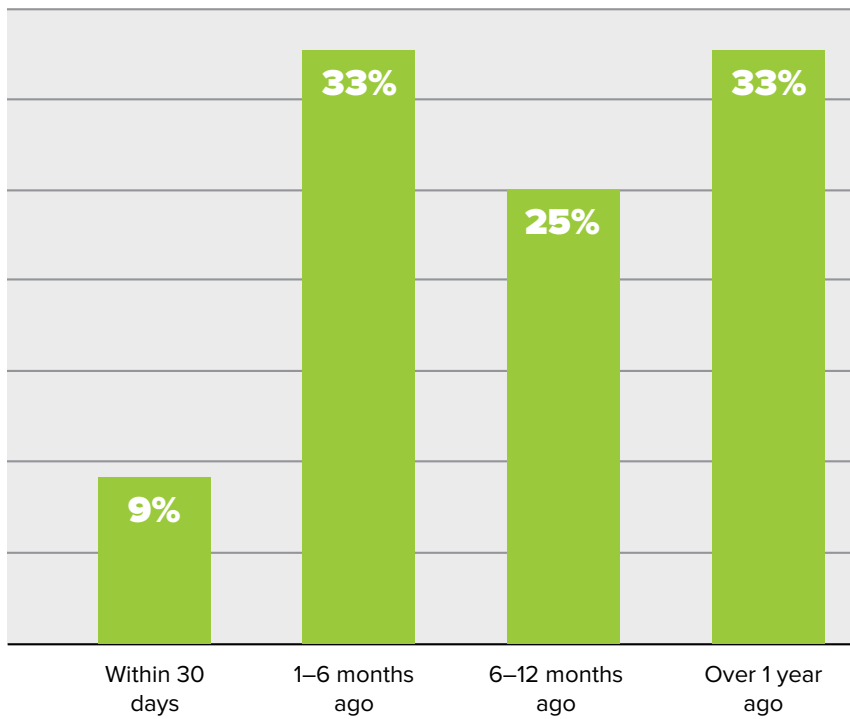


This tracks closely with the proportion of Buyers who rated themselves as very likely to recommend the Seller (see Figure 18).



About 42% of referrals occurred within the last 6 months.

**Fig. 20.** Buyers' Most Recent Referral

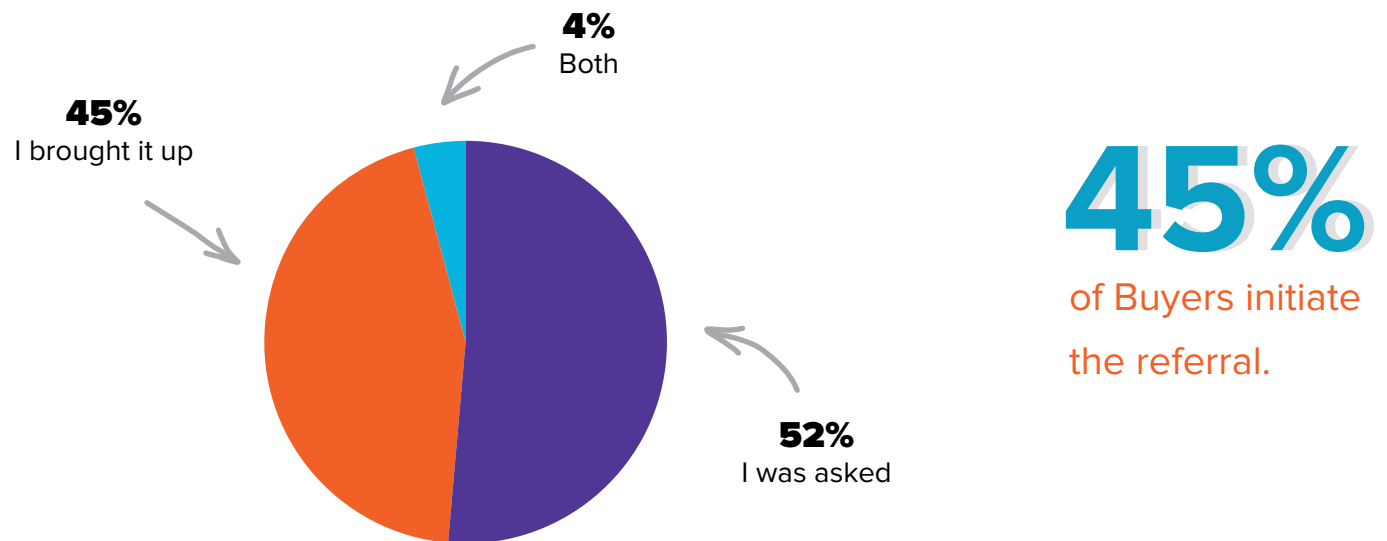


**42%**  
of referrals  
occurred within  
the last 6  
months.

About 1 in 3 referrals occurred over a year ago (see Figure 20).

When asked to explain the circumstances around referrals, most Buyers (52%) waited until they were asked by someone before making the referral.

**Fig. 21.** Circumstances Around Referrals

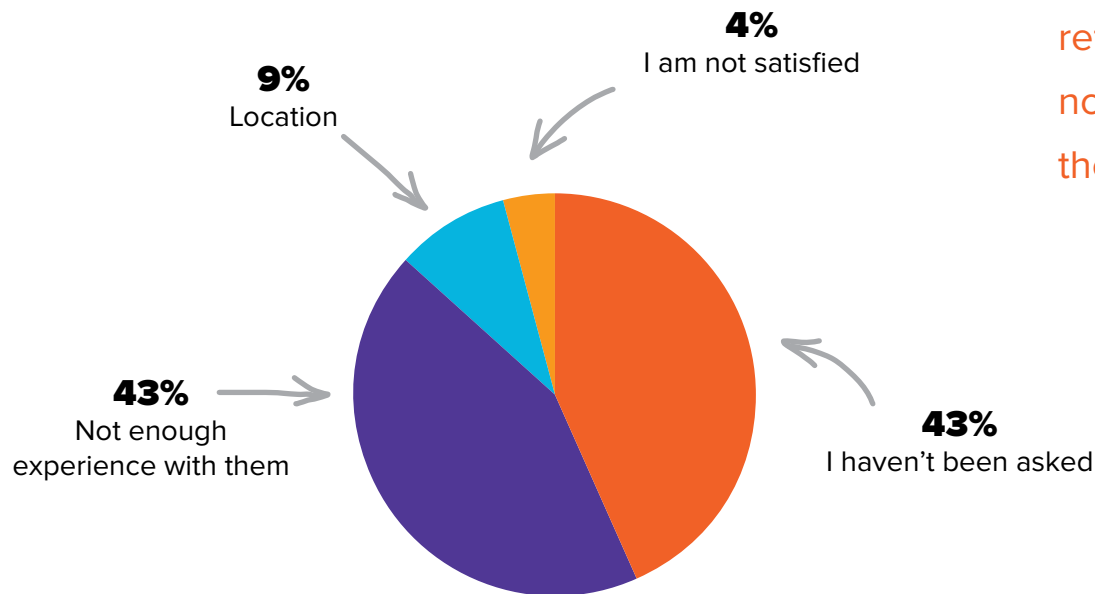


About 45% of Buyers initiate the referral. These are your best referral sources since they are behaving proactively.

## Reasons for Non-Referrals

One approach to increasing referrals is to understand why Buyers don't recommend Sellers. The results of this analysis are shown in Figure 22.

**Fig. 22.** Why Buyers Don't Make Referrals



# 43%

of Buyers didn't refer because no one asked them.

43% of Buyers didn't refer because no one asked them.

A similar proportion didn't refer because the relationship was still too new. Another 9% cited location issues, (e.g., Seller wasn't located in the right city).

**Only 4% of non-referrals were the result of dissatisfaction with the Seller.**

It would seem that strategies aimed at encouraging inquiries about current clients are addressing a more prevalent issue than those focusing on remediating client satisfaction.

## ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

# If Referrals Are So Important, Where Is Your Referral Plan...

To successfully generate referrals, there are a number of things providers can do. One is to create a word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) strategy. WOMM can help shape and influence the conversations already happening among buyers and other influencers. WOMM management breaks down into four primary components:



- 1. Monitor.** Find and track the conversations that are occurring about your firm. Identify and track the people most likely to share their opinions about your firm (both supporters and detractors).
- 2. Engage.** Take an active role in WOM by engaging with influencers in the various forums (blogs, social networks, etc.) where conversations are taking place or by providing company-developed tools for people to have conversations and share information.
- 3. Manage.** Give them something to talk about and create these conversations about the company, brand, offerings, and the like by providing good content and a point of view.
- 4. Measure.** Track the results of your efforts.

By focusing on these components, providers can harness the power of peer recommendations to generate leads, improve overall marketing results, and ease the burden of search for buyers.

Another way to create referrals is through a formal referral and/or reference program. In our experience with Accounting and Finance companies, we find that very few have formal programs for references and referrals.

We know clients are willing to refer, but not everyone is going out of their way to do it. Therefore, providers need to be proactive and ask.

Of course, for a referral program to be successful, the providers have to actually be worth referring. If the firm isn't delivering on its promises and doesn't have satisfied clients, then it must work on this first.

*RAIN Group*

# 8

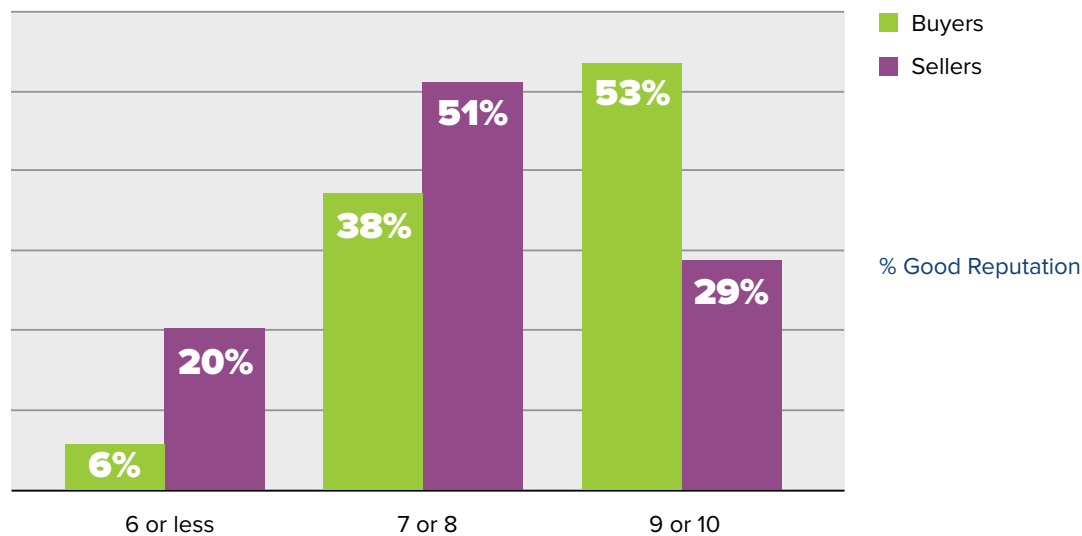
## Understanding Your Brand

How strong are Sellers' brands within the Accounting and Financial Services sector? We have addressed this important issue by evaluating how Buyers and Sellers view the two critical components of a professional services brand: reputation and visibility.

### Firm Reputation

Figure 23 shows Buyers' and Sellers' ratings of a firm's reputation.

**Fig. 23.** Reputation Rating of Seller's Firm



Just over half (53%) of Buyers rated Sellers' reputation very highly (9 or 10). Only 6% gave them a low rating (6 or less).

Sellers were more critical of their own reputation than Buyers.



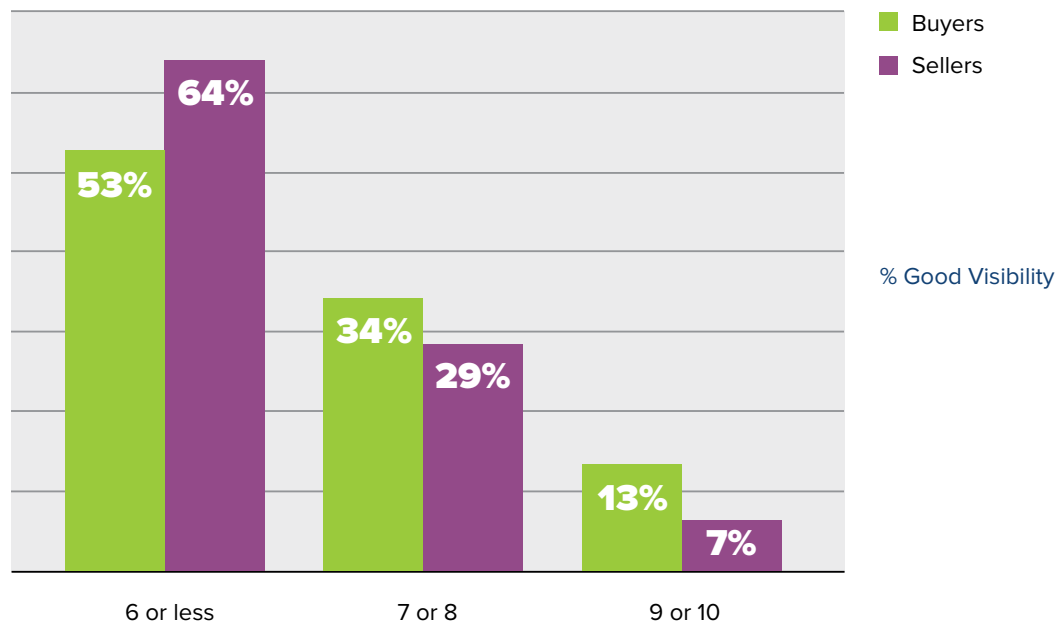
Sellers were more critical of their own reputation than Buyers. They were, in fact, 3 times more likely to rate themselves poorly (rating of 6 or less) than Buyers. Are Sellers just humble? Out of touch with the marketplace? Too close to their firm's limitations?

While the research doesn't tell us the reasons for this disconnect, it does identify an important difference in perception. Many firms may be more highly regarded by their clients than they realize.

## Firm Visibility

Ratings of the Seller's firm marketplace visibility are shown in Figure 24.

**Fig. 24.** Visibility Rating of Seller's Firm



Marketplace visibility was rated much lower than firm reputation. Firms with great reputations but low visibility are likely quite common.

Sellers are more likely to see their firms as less visible in the marketplace than their clients do. This is the same pattern we found with firm reputation, albeit somewhat less pronounced. There is clearly a lot of room for increasing firm visibility in the Accounting and Financial Services marketplace. If an increase in visibility is accompanied by a strong reputation, the brand will be much stronger.



If an increase in visibility is accompanied by a strong reputation, the brand will be much stronger.

## ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

# The Most Powerful Branding of All...

If branding is our task in a professional services firm, what do we do? Assuming the underlying goals are to generate awareness, understanding, and preference:



- If you're shooting for brand **recognition**, what do you think a potential client will remember more: seeing your ad in a trade publication many times or hearing a great presentation from you that gave them a sense of your personality, expertise, style, and competence?
- If brand **articulation** is your goal, do you think people will remember your snappy tagline, or will people remember the articles you wrote that helped them work through a specific problem with which they were struggling?
- If brand **memorization** is your goal, what are you doing to keep your message constantly in front of current and prospective buyers?
- If brand **preference** is your goal, what do you think is more powerful: all the marketing communications you can aim at them over the course of two years, or one actual and very positive experience of what it's like to work with you?

Of course, it's the latter in each of the above situations that makes the strongest and longest lasting brand impressions. Instead of focusing on your logo and your brochure, focus on improving the ability of your professional staff to provide value, both with their clients and in the marketing and selling process.

The most powerful branding of all are the impressions your professionals can make on individual clients and prospects. The client interactions they lead, the work product they deliver, the presentations they give, the articles they write, and the value they provide in every contact with the world outside the firm is more important from a branding perspective than any marketing-based initiative you can implement.

So, focus on the people at your firm as the secret weapon for your branding. Help them be better across-the-board tomorrow than they are today. Give them more opportunities to connect with the marketplace. Improve your firm's client satisfaction and loyalty by improving the value you provide to your clients. Develop the passion, enthusiasm, and motivation of the professionals at your firm to create a vibrant culture of client satisfaction.

Strive to make even the smallest, most incremental gains in the overall excellence of your firm. Then communicate that excellence to the market in ways that create actual value for clients and prospects. For when the market sees, not your logo and snappy tagline, but your passion, excellence, and dedication to their success, you'll be executing the most powerful branding of all.

*RAIN Group*

# 9

## Conclusion

What does this research mean for your Accounting and Financial Services firm? Here are our top take-aways:

- 1. A strong brand, both online and offline, is important to being considered by potential clients.** Reputation and visibility really do matter when it comes to making the list of potential new firms that Buyers consider.
- 2. Better expertise or specialization is the top deciding factor when it comes to Buyers' final decision on a new firm.** Lack of industry knowledge is most likely to lose you a new prospect.
- 3. The impacts of price and customer service are vastly overrated by Sellers.** If you want to unseat an incumbent you are much more likely to do it through specialization/expertise than through lower price.
- 4. When it comes to considering a new firm, about a quarter of Buyers are in the persuadable range.** Delivering on your promises is the single best predictor of client loyalty.
- 5. Overall, 76% of Buyers are very likely to recommend Sellers.** Forty three percent (43%) of Buyers didn't refer because no one asked them. Only 4% of non-referrals were because of dissatisfaction with Sellers.
- 6. Many firms are more highly regarded by their clients than they realize.** Marketplace visibility was rated much lower than firm reputation. But visibility alone is not enough. Only if an increase in visibility is coupled with a strong reputation will the brand be much stronger.

Do these observations apply to all firms? Not necessarily. Each firm's specific circumstances are unique. But there are some clear patterns that point to common blind spots and missed opportunities. The firms that are the first to act on them will likely benefit the most.

# Additional Resources

## Special Offer to Our Accounting & Finance Readers: Free Marketing Review

We encourage you to take advantage of a complimentary phone consultation. This is your opportunity to talk to a Hinge marketing expert about your marketing and branding challenges. Discuss your situation and learn which marketing strategies are really working in the Accounting & Financial Services market today and what opportunities your firm should be considering. We promise there will be no hard sell or obligation — just a lot of valuable information from someone who knows your industry.

Call us today at 703-391-8870 and ask for your Free Marketing Review.



### Online Marketing for Professional Services

In this research-based book, we describe how traditional marketing is being replaced by newer online techniques. We also reveal which techniques are used by the most successful firms and which are a waste of your time. It's free!

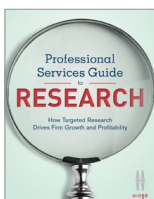
[www.hingemarketing.com/online-marketing-book](http://www.hingemarketing.com/online-marketing-book)



### Spiraling Up: How to Create a High Growth, High Value Professional Services Firm

This book uncovers the secrets of high growth, high value professional services firms and describes what your firm can do to emulate them. It's free!

[www.hingemarketing.com/spiralingup](http://www.hingemarketing.com/spiralingup)



### Professional Services Guide to Research

This guide will teach you everything you need to know to get started with targeted research that drives firm growth and profitability. It's free!

[www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/hinges\\_professional\\_services\\_guide\\_to\\_research](http://www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/hinges_professional_services_guide_to_research)



### **The Brand Building Guide for Professional Services Firms**

Discover strategies, tips and tools to strengthen your brand, improve your firm's reputation and increase your visibility among your target audiences. It's free!

[www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/the\\_brand\\_building\\_guide](http://www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/the_brand_building_guide)



### **Professional Services Marketing Blog**

Read the latest insights, real-world case studies and marketing tips from the minds of one of the nation's leading professional services marketing firms. Subscribe to the blog today.

[www.hingemarketing.com/blog](http://www.hingemarketing.com/blog)



### **Professional Services Executive Forum**

Join the only LinkedIn Group of professional services executives that explores how to build a high growth, high value professional services firm.

# About Hinge

Hinge is a leading branding and marketing firm that specializes in professional services. We conduct regular research into the industries that we serve – with a particular focus on high growth firms – so that we can offer professional services firms the insights and edge they need to break out in a competitive and changing marketplace. With a comprehensive suite of online and offline branding and marketing services, we can help your firm build a competitive advantage. To learn more, visit us at [www.hingemarketing.com](http://www.hingemarketing.com).

To keep atop the latest branding and marketing strategies for your professional services firm, follow us on social media and subscribe to our blog.

Twitter: [@HingeMarketing](https://twitter.com/HingeMarketing)

Blog: [www.hingemarketing.com/blog](http://www.hingemarketing.com/blog)

Facebook: [HingeMarketing](https://www.facebook.com/HingeMarketing)

LinkedIn: [www.linkedin.com/company/hinge](http://www.linkedin.com/company/hinge)

YouTube: [HingeMarketing](https://www.youtube.com/HingeMarketing)

[www.hingemarketing.com](http://www.hingemarketing.com)



## About Hinge Research Institute

At Hinge, research is more than skin deep. It is an essential part of who we are, helping us and our clients adapt to a changing marketplace and grow faster. We also believe in sharing our knowledge with our clients and the broader professional services community. This compulsion had us establish the Hinge Research Institute. The Institute is committed to conducting innovative original research on professional services firms and their clients.

We share our ongoing discoveries in research reports, webinars, whitepapers, articles and books. Please visit us at [www.hingeresearch.com](http://www.hingeresearch.com) to access our latest research.

### **Study Director**

Lee W. Frederiksen, Ph.D.

[lfrederiksen@hingemarketing.com](mailto:lfrederiksen@hingemarketing.com)

703.391.8870



# About RAIN Group

RAIN Group is a sales performance consulting and training firm dedicated to helping companies succeed with the complex sale. Founded in 2002, the firm has grown over the last decade into a recognized leader in sales improvement with an international client base.



RAIN Group has helped tens of thousands of salespeople, managers, and professionals in dozens of countries increase their sales significantly with the RAIN Selling<sup>SM</sup> methodology.

RAIN Group leaders Mike Schultz and John Doerr were named the global Top Sales Thought Leaders in 2011 by Top Sales World. They are leaders in sales research and publishing, including *The Wall Street Journal* bestseller *Rainmaking Conversations*, *How Clients Buy*, *Lead Generation Benchmark Report*, *High Performance in Strategic Account Management*, and others.

They publish [RainToday.com](http://RainToday.com), named the Top Sales Resource Site by Top Sales World in 2010 and 2011. Their leaders speak at conferences and events globally on sales and selling.