

Episode 108: Generating More Income Through Cultivating Excellent Client Experiences—with Candice Washington

Deb Zahn: Hi. I want to welcome you to this week's episode of The Craft of Consulting podcast. So in this episode, we're going to go even deeper into client experience because this really, at the heart of it, is about doing two things: maximizing the revenue that you're able to get into your consulting business and two—and they're related—is maximizing the amount of value that you can bring to your clients. I'm going to bring somebody on who is an absolute expert at this, and she knows this stuff better than anybody I've heard talk about it. Candice Washington, who is The Client Curator, will dig deep into the things that you need to do, and the things that you need to have in place and pay attention to, in order to create client experiences that enable you to retain clients and build a business based on the reality of where most of your revenue is going to be coming from. I can't wait for you to hear all of the juicy, wonderful things that she's going to share with us. Let's get started. I want to welcome my guest today, Candice Washington. Candice, welcome to the show.

Candice Washington: Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

Deb Zahn: So let's start off. Tell my listeners what you do.

Candice Washington: So I work with service-based businesses, primarily, to help them improve their client experience so that they are able to not only keep more of their clients and increase their client retention but also begin to earn more money from their existing client base.

Deb Zahn: All of which sounds fantastic, but let's take it all the way home because, for some reason, not everybody knows that client experience is so important. So why do *you* tell folks it matters so much?

Candice Washington: It matters because if people are not having a good experience in their interactions with you—in their journey of doing business with you—they are not going to continue to pay you. Like I tell people all the time, “I am not paying anybody for a raggedy experience.” Right? I want to be able to enjoy doing business with you, and if it gets too complicated or it's unpleasant in any manner, I'm going to take my business somewhere else because none of us need any more complications in our life, right? Doing business should not be hard. It should not be unpleasant. And so when it gets to that point, your clients are looking for somewhere else to go, and as I always tell people, “There is no shortage of places for us to do business, right? We all have competitors. There are other options. We all have other options out there that our clients can go to.” So client experience really, really, really is critical to the longevity of the relationship you have with your clients.

Deb Zahn: I love it. That just makes my heart sing hearing that. So let's get the bad stuff out of the way, and then we're going to talk about the good stuff. So what are the common mistakes that folks who are trying to build a service-based business face? What are the common things they do, and what does it result in?

Candice Washington: So the biggest mistake I would say is a lack of communication and lack of *proper* communication. I think we undervalue the importance of communication—the significance of communication—to the client-business relationship and really, any relationship, right? Just think about it even in your personal life. If you're trying to build a relationship with someone, you have to have communication. There has to be consistent communication. There has to be effective communication—

all of those things. And when you are not communicating with your clients and your customers, that just opens up a can of worms for anything to happen: for them to take their business somewhere else, for there to be a misunderstanding, for them to start having a poor experience because things become too complicated. It's just...it's really a can of worms. And so one thing I encourage all business owners to do is to make sure that you are consistently communicating with your clients and customers.

I had a perfect example earlier today, as a matter of fact. I placed an order. Now let me...let me give you a little bit of backstory. For people who don't know me, I've been told that I look short on video. I don't know how you can tell someone's height on video.

Deb Zahn: That's weird.

Candice Washington: But I am not short. I am six-three. So I can't go into places and buy pants off the rack. Shirts, skirts—all of those other things—fair game, but pants, I can't do that. So I ordered some jeans today from this company that has longer inseams, and I'm just in love. So I ordered three pairs of jeans, and the company reached out to me within 30 minutes of me placing the order to say, "Hey, one of the jeans that you ordered...we don't have the exact inseam that you ordered, so here's what we can do..." And I was able to select another option to proceed with because they communicated with me. They didn't wait days to let me know, "Hey, this is what happened." Or they didn't just send me two pairs of jeans when I ordered three. The fact is that they reached out to me and said, "Hey, this is what happened. Here's how we can fix it."...It was a pleasant experience, and they even offered me a discount on my next purchase. I didn't need it, but...

Deb Zahn: You took it.

Candice Washington: I was like, "I'll take it." But just the fact that they communicated...and I think, again, as I said, we underestimate the value of communication. Most clients and customers are going to be reasonable, right?

Deb Zahn: Yeah.

Candice Washington: And what I always and often tell people is that when we don't communicate, we take away someone's ability to be reasonable because they don't know what's going on. They don't...they don't know if something came up, and that's why they haven't heard from us. They don't know if we're going out of business. They don't...they don't know, right? And so when we don't communicate, we take away their ability to be reasonable, to be understanding. And so don't underestimate the value of communication.

Deb Zahn: So when you produce the first line of T-shirts that says that, I really want...I really want to be the first in line. That was one of the best articulations I've ever heard of it because I tell people, "Remember what happens when people don't communicate to us...If you leave blank spaces, do we fill them in with unicorns and pixie dust?" No, we don't. We fill them in with our worst fears and interpretations.

Candice Washington: Exactly. We all do that, right? We all just...we make up scenarios in our mind and they're not unicorns and pixie dust scenarios. They are the worst-case scenario, oftentimes. And so in

order to take away someone's need to do that, just communicate. It's...I mean, simple stuff, but you would be surprised how often it doesn't happen.

Deb Zahn: Yeah, I love that. So what's another big one that you see and it just makes you cringe?

Candice Washington: Now Deb, you...you've been following me for a little bit of time. You know.

Deb Zahn: I have indeed.

Candice Washington: I am big on data. Data, data, data, data, data, data, data.

Deb Zahn: Yes. I knew that was coming.

Candice Washington: It is critical to the longevity and the sustainability of your business and particularly in the small business space. I just really...I've come to learn that data is so underutilized, undervalued, especially in the online business space. We are just going out here, operating off of feelings and emotions, and that is just not how you operate a business. Major corporations have this on lock. They understand the importance of the client experience. They understand the importance of client retention, and they are able to make data-driven, strategic decisions for their company and for their business based on data.

And so when you don't have data, you are really flying your business blind because you don't know what's working and what's not. You don't know why what's working is working and why what's not working is not working. You don't know. You don't know how long clients tend to stay with you. You don't know the average value of every contract or purchase that you have. You just don't know these things, and in order to be able to create strategic decisions for your business and then implement those plans, you have to do that based on data.

So often, we think...and I've worked with business owners who say, "Well, I just...I feel like last month was a bad month." And then, I'm like, "Okay. Well, let's look at the numbers." And they go look at the numbers and it's like, "Oh, well, it wasn't as bad as I thought." Our feelings and our heart will deceive us, right?

Deb Zahn: Oh yeah.

Candice Washington: And what I always tell people is you have to go back to the facts. What do the facts say? In this case, the facts are data. You have to go back to that data and see what it says because data is not...it's not subjective. It's very black and white, and it's going to tell you: X, Y, and Z; and A, B, and C. It's going to give you exactly what you need to be able to move forward in a strategic way and in a sustainable way in your company.

Deb Zahn: I love that. So if I'm a service-based provider like consultants are—who are the folks who are listening to this—when you're assessing whether or not they really have a strategy related to client experience and client retention, what are one of the...you know, the top data points that you're looking for because they might show up and say, "Oh, no, no, no. I have data"?

Candice Washington: Yeah.

Deb Zahn: Data is often still feeling, but what are you looking for?

Candice Washington: I would look at your client-lifetime value. So what is the...what is the value of your clients to your company? How much are they worth, right? Look at your revenue churn rate. If you don't know your revenue churn rate, you don't know how quickly you're losing money in your business, and that's important. Look at your NPS score. That's going to tell you how loyal clients are to your business. Look at your recurring revenue. How much money do you have on a recurring basis, whether it's monthly or quarterly? That's going to impact and let you know how much cash flow you have and then also, your repeat purchase ratio. What is the likelihood or the percentage of clients that you have that purchase from you again?

So those are some of the high-level data points that you really should be tracking in your company so that you can get more of a holistic picture of what's going on with your clients and what's going on with the money that you're making in your company. How fast are you earning it? How fast are you losing it? What's your cash flow situation looking at? And so I would say those are the top level, some of the high-level data points that you should be tracking.

Deb Zahn: That's fabulous. Now I also know that one of the things you talk a lot about is having systems and processes in place, so you are not leaving any of this to chance or, in my case, memory, which doesn't exist. You also are very careful to say you can automate some things, but you can't automate everything. So can you paint a picture of, ideally, what you would like to see in the folks that you work with in terms of the systems and processes balanced with the real juicy relationship stuff you have to do?

Candice Washington: Absolutely. So I'm a big fan of systems. I'll just say that. Systems are your friend. We need them to operate these businesses. They are great. We need them. We need automatic email responders. We need client-relationship management systems. We need analytics platforms. We need all of these things, right? So I'm a big, big fan of systems, and you absolutely want to have a CRM that is managing all of your client relationships. You definitely, definitely, definitely need an analytics platform. So an analytics platform is going to allow you to run reports, and it will create dashboards for you. It'll allow you to make projections for revenue in your company, for churn in your company—all of those things—and so you absolutely need an analytics platform. Excel and Google Sheets are not going to cut it. So if you don't have an analytics platform, get one. There are several out there.

And so we absolutely need systems to run these businesses, so some things can be put on autopilot. Some workflows you can run and emails will go out, some email campaigns, things of that nature, but never underestimate the importance of the personal touch. We are such a digital society in a digital age these days, and so technology is great. I love it...huge fan of it. But the personal touch has gotten lost in a lot of businesses, and so if a client emails or calls...most of the time, they'll email. They'll respond to an email with a complaint or a concern. The first thing I tell people to do is take it offline. Take it offline. Reach out and say, "Hey, thank you for your email," or "Thank you for your message," because a lot of people are messaging via social media these days. "Thank you for your message. What's the best number to reach you and the best time that you are available?" Take it offline because, you know, when we're writing things, tone is misunderstood, you know?

Deb Zahn: Yep.

Candice Washington: Intent is misunderstood. Just...there's a lot of room for things to be interpreted wrong or incorrectly, and things get even further off course. So I always encourage people. Take it offline. Have a conversation, and when you have that conversation, hear your client out. Most people just want to be heard, right?

Deb Zahn: Yeah.

Candice Washington: Hear them out, and let them just kind of unload and speak their piece. Then work with them to find resolve. That's the biggest thing I always encourage people to do. When it comes to other personal touches, send cards in the mail. Send gifts. Send things of that nature to let people know, and let your clients know, there is a human on the other side of this technology. We can automate a lot of things, but that personal touch is something that should never be automated.

Deb Zahn: Yeah. I love that, and I know that you also talked about this. It's not just when they're paying you because that's not what relationships are.

Candice Washington: It's not. It's not, and you can do things in an unexpected manner, like when people aren't expecting anything. We had a client yesterday who hired a new team member, and that team member was able to close a new client for that firm. And so we're...I need to, today actually, send out a card, just a congratulations card, like, "You're killing it. You're doing a great job." Totally unexpected, right? But just things like that that are...you know, the client is a client, and yeah, they're paying, but we don't just want to celebrate clients with thanks and show our appreciation for clients when they become a client. Again, I often tell people client retention is a marathon, right? It is not a sprint. It is a relationship that you are going to have to continue to build, foster, and just make stronger and stronger over time. And so all those little personal touches along the way...people remember things like that.

Deb Zahn: They absolutely do. I've actually had long-term clients go on vacation and stop by my house on the way back, so I could give them a pumpkin I grew. I mean...you know, because I care about them. I wasn't just...I didn't grow pumpkins just to give them to my clients. So for a lot of consultants who are starting out and don't have any business, I think it's easy for them to think through those personal touches in getting things set up, but there are also folks who've been at it for a while who maybe didn't set it up the right way when they first started. We're all just going to be honest with each other. Or, they have a lot of work right now, and it's hard to stay on top of all of the things that matter with experience. How do you...how do you help the folks that are already pretty busy, which is good because that means that they've gained some success, stay on top of the experience aspect of what they're doing?

Candice Washington: So I'm a big fan of systems, as you've heard. I'm also a big fan of hiring. So hire the people that you need that have the expertise that you need in your company, right? If you're not able to hire another team member to charge with the experience portion—or maybe you have another team member that you can add that to kind of their responsibilities—but if not, if you have a good CRM, it's going to allow you to do things like make notes in your client profile about special dates like anniversaries and the birthdays of their children, or things of that nature. It's going to allow you to put that information in their client profile, and then you can set a reminder for your calendar that it will pop up on your calendar a week before or two weeks before so that it will jog your memory to do something for that particular client.

So it's not as difficult as it may seem and may think. Obviously, if you're not using a CRM or if you're not using a CRM in that manner, setting all that up and inputting all that client information is...you know, it's

going to take a little bit of time in the beginning, but the return that you're going to get is going to be definitely worth it.

Deb Zahn: Yeah, and the reality is when I started consulting a decade ago, stuff like that existed, but it was for big companies. It wasn't for small companies, so it wasn't like you could look at a shelf and say, "Ooh, I like that one," because the shelf was empty. There are no excuses today.

Candice Washington: There aren't. There are so many companies out there that are doing client gifts and offering client gift boxes, and it doesn't have to be anything grandiose, you know? It can be something small, but it really is the thought that is going to make an impression with your client. You know, I often talk about my aesthetician—and she does a great job with my skin—but she also has such a great experience and treats her clients so well, and I think about the different client-appreciation parties and things that she's had pre-COVID (but things that she's done for her clients to really make us feel special and celebrate us as her clients).

If I ever consider taking my business somewhere else, and I ever consider going to another esthetician, I'm going to remember, "Okay, Candice. If you leave, you're going to be leaving all this extra stuff, right? Like all these client appreciation events...you're going to be forfeiting that as well." And so that really is the point, not only to thank your clients for doing business with you, not only to make sure that their experience is a memorable one and a positive one, but if they think about going to a competitor of yours or whatever the case may be, they're going to think about the times that you sent them a gift. They're going to think about the times that you picked up the phone and called them. They're going to think about all of those things, and that's going to be a consideration in whatever decision they're looking to make for whatever reason.

Deb Zahn: That's right. Or, they go try someone else, and they're like, "Oh, no, no, no, no. You got to come back."

Candice Washington: Certain people that you do business with set a standard. So if you're a standard-setter and you're a bar-setter for your clients, that's a great position to be in because now they're going to be expecting the exceptional experience that they get with you from everybody, and it's wonderful to be a bar-setter. But also remember, if someone else has set the bar, they're expecting the same exceptional experience from you. So there are two sides to that.

Deb Zahn: That's right. That's right. The reality is there are so many bad consultants out there.

Candice Washington: Yes.

Deb Zahn: That I've often come in...

Candice Washington: There're just so many bad businesses.

Deb Zahn: Oh, goodness gracious.

Candice Washington: Ugh.

Deb Zahn: And if you come in after them, again, the goal is to set a high bar. It's not to step the one inch that that bar is currently. You really want to do the best, but I also love that you said, "Hire folks," because I think a lot of independent consultants, even at the beginning, can't imagine that. If you were talking to a consultant who's like, "Look, I'm busy now. I really care about client experience," what's the one hire that you would tell me, "Invest in *this*...this makes the most sense"?

Candice Washington: A client experience person, whatever you want to call that within your organizational framework: someone who really cares about clients, who really has a heart for people, and cares about how people are treated. That's really what you want to look for. You know, my business coach and mentor often talks about how, when we're hiring people, we need to be looking for the intangibles, right? We need to be looking for the things that you can't teach. My assistant is phenomenal, and she does things that I don't ask her to do. She takes initiative on a level that I have never witnessed in my life. She messaged me yesterday. She was like, "Hey, I was just looking at your website, and there's a little typo here." I didn't ask her to do that, but she took initiative, right? And so it's those kinds of intangibles that you want to be looking for in people when you're hiring because the skill sets, you can teach.

Deb Zahn: That's right.

Candice Washington: You can teach someone how to use a system, right? You can teach someone how to send an email or use a workflow that you've established in whatever system you're using, but it's those intangibles. You can't teach work ethic, right? You can't teach initiative. You can't teach accountability. It's those sorts of things that you should be looking for in anybody that you hire, really, because everything else they need to learn, they can be taught.

Deb Zahn: That's right. Yeah. It's that intrinsic motivation that they walk in the door with. Anytime I've ignored that, by the way, I've lived to regret it, so that's fantastic advice. So I know one of the things that you do is you also assess. So it's one thing for, let's say a consultant in this example, to say, "Okay, I get it"—or, they look back and cringe at some of the bad client-experience situations that they created—how do they know what to pay attention to? What does your assessment look like that would help them figure out what action to take?

Candice Washington: So when I offer my curated assessments, it's really...it's a long process. And a long process by that, I mean it's about a minimum of four hours, and I meet with a client. Most of the businesses that I work with have teams of people. I've worked with a few law firms, and they have teams of people, a couple of attorneys, support staff, and things of that nature. So I will do an assessment with them where we just dig in and dive into their entire company. I have them walk me through their client experience. "So when someone reaches out, what happens?" And then, "Okay. They connect with you, how? Do they connect with you via email, or do they have a call with you? If they have a call with you, okay, then what happens after that?" We go into that level of detail for every... if you have multiple services, we do that for every service, right?

And so we go into that level of detail. I look at all of the systems that they're using. So that's going to tell me...a lot of the systems that are common in the online space, I'm very familiar with, so it's going to tell me what you're using and, really, what you're tracking. I'm able to really determine what you're tracking by the systems that you tell me you're using. So we look at all the systems and what they do. We look at...we talk about where they want to go, right? What are their plans for the next six months, for the next year? What is the overall goal for their business and their company?

We just really do a deep dive and go into everything, like, "How much money you have you been making?" So we do look at financials as well, like, "The past six months, what have been your expenses? What's your revenue been?" I look at all of that. I take all that information, and then I prepare an action plan that is customized just to that specific business based on what we talked about. So I look at their numbers. Most companies, unfortunately, don't know their client retention percentage, right? They don't know how many clients are staying with them. They have no idea, so I'm able to take all the information and look at, "Okay, you have this number of clients now," and make projections, "So if you retained 'X' number of clients, this is where you can look to be. This is what you can look for your revenue and your profit to be."

And then I'm able to make projections like that. I'm able to make recommendations for systems that will fill some of the gaps that they have. I'm able to create milestones for them to get them towards the goal of where they want to be. I'm able to recommend some systems that they need, but they don't have, just all of those sorts of things. I create a customized action plan for that particular business to say, "Hey, this is where you are. This is where you want to go. This is what you need to do. Here's how you can improve your client experience, right? Here's a customized client retention plan just for your business that you can implement to begin to increase the amount of business and the amount of clients that you retain and that stay with your company."

Deb Zahn: I love that because then it's not based on a, "Well, I *feel* like we retain clients. Don't we retain clients?"

Candice Washington: We don't do feelings over here.

Deb Zahn: No. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, but one of the feelings that I know comes up and can distract folks from the path, even if it's beautifully laid out, is—we'll call it shiny client syndrome—where they like chasing new clients. There's the thrill. Now a lot of consultants who are professionals hate the business development part, but there are some folks that just...they're always looking at new and not actually terribly focused on the back end. So how do you help them get over that tendency that they have?

Candice Washington: Data.

Deb Zahn: Data, data, data. That's great.

Candice Washington: And I say data because it really...we are always told, "Oh, it's all about the new." And new clients are important to business, absolutely. I will never say that, but when I say data, the data says and the data tells us that 80%—eight zero—80% of your future revenue is going to come from just 20% of your existing clients. So said another way, only 20% of the revenue that you're going to make in the future is going to come from somewhere outside of the clients that you already have.

Deb Zahn: Yep.

Candice Washington: That's how critical client retention is. And you can't retain clients if you have a poor client experience, right? It feeds into...one feeds into the other, and so it's *that* important. And so I encourage people. Most people, when they hear that statistic, they're like, "Oh. I didn't realize it was *that* important," but it is *that* important. And so to anyone who would say, "Well, I'm just going to keep

going on client attraction," you can do some of that, but if you focus more on the clients that you already have, the clients that are in your ecosystem, that already know what it's like to work with you, that have already given you their money, that already trust you, that have already built a relationship with you...if you keep focusing on those clients, continuing to build and foster that relationship, maximizing those clients, getting them to spend more money with you, that's going to outweigh any amount of new client that you can bring in because the data also tells us that it costs *more* to bring a new client up to the same level of spending as an existing client.

So I always talk about data, and I do that because it really is important, but also because I don't want you to just take my word for it. These are studies that have been done, right? And so that is how important all of this is to the success and sustainability of a company.

Deb Zahn: Yeah, and I imagine it's a virtual cycle because...so you mentioned the NPS, the net promoter score, which is also based on how they experience you. What I've learned, because I've worked with clients repeatedly over multiple years—not because I'm constantly trying to upsell but because I pay attention to what they need and what they have a demand for and all of that good stuff—but every time I work with them, I'm able to serve them better because I know them better. I know what quirks they have. I know what things they hate. I know what advice they will never take. It doesn't matter how good I think it is. I mean, all that stuff, you only learn in exactly the way we learn in other relationships. You only learn it through time and experience.

Candice Washington: Absolutely. Absolutely. And the other thing about building a relationship with your clients is that once you've got that relationship and they begin to trust you more and more, they'll start sending you business, right? And so again, new clients are important, so I'm not saying don't ever get any new clients, but they will start marketing for you. They will start sending you business. Most likely, people that they send you are going to do business (Right?) because they're looking for someone that does what you do. They get this referral from somebody that they trust, and so more than likely, you're going to convert a referral than you are a cold lead. And so it really is. It's all a cycle.

Deb Zahn: That's right because there's already a good kernel of trust there as opposed to a cold lead you got. You've got to spend some time warming them up.

Candice Washington: Absolutely.

Deb Zahn: Yeah. I love that. So how can folks find you?

Candice Washington: Yes. You can find me on Facebook and Instagram, “@IAmCandiceWashington”. Candice is C-A-N-D-I-C-E. If you put A-C-E, you're not going to find me, but I am on Facebook and Instagram: “I Am Candice Washington”. My website also is iamcandicewashington.com. I try to keep everything as simple as possible.

Deb Zahn: Yep, and we will have that in the show notes. I have to say. So I can't even remember *why* and *how* I started following you, but I'm just like, “Num, num, num, num, num.” I mean, it's so good, and every time you drop a post—I follow you on Instagram—it's just laden with so much value, which is why I was like, “I've got to get her on my podcast. This is just too good.” So let me ask you my last question. You're out helping, making the world a better place, improving these client experiences everywhere you go. How do you bring balance to your life, however it is you define that?

Candice Washington: I am big on self-care.

Deb Zahn: Yay.

Candice Washington: So I...every month, once a month, I get a facial. I get a massage. I just recently, in October of last year, started going to get my hair done again because I normally do my own hair.

Deb Zahn: Aah.

Candice Washington: And as you know, Deb, yesterday I spent all day in the hair salon letting someone re-color my hair. First time in four years I've let anyone do my purple—because I usually do my purple—but it allowed me to be able to allow *them* to operate in *their* expertise while *I* continued to work through the day and operate in *my* expertise. And so I'm really big on time and valuing your time because that's a resource none of us will ever be able to get back. So I'm very mindful of how I spend my time. When I notice myself working really late for a consecutive number of days or just the hustle and bustle, I'm really mindful of just forcing myself to detach so that I can just kind of decompress.

But I'm very...I've gotten better on self-care. I wasn't always good with self-care. It's been about 18 months that I've really been in this groove of making sure and being mindful that I'm taking care of Candice because if I'm not at my best, then I can't give anyone else my best.

Deb Zahn: That's right. So self-care is also a service. It's service to you, and it's service to others. I love that. Well, Candice, I can't tell you how fantastic this has been. I appreciate everything that you're doing, and thank you so much for coming on the show.

Candice Washington: Thank you so much for having me.

Deb Zahn: Thanks so much for listening to this episode of The Craft of Consulting podcast. I want to ask you to do, actually, three things. If you enjoyed this episode, or if you've enjoyed any of my other ones, hit subscribe. I've got a lot of other great guests that are coming up and a lot of other great content, and I don't want you to miss anything. But the other two things that I'm going to ask you to do is, one is, if you have any comments—so if you have any suggestions or any kind of feedback that will help make this podcast more helpful to more listeners—please include those. And then, the last thing is, again, if you've gotten something out of this, share it. Share it with somebody you know who's a consultant or thinking about being a consultant, and make sure that they also have access to all this great content and all the other great content that's going to be coming up.

So as always, you can go and get more wonderful information and tools at craftofconsulting.com. Thanks so much. I will talk to you on the next episode. Bye-bye.