

# Firm foundations will master the dragon



Tony Vidler looks at what advisers need to do to be successful this year

According to the Chinese calendar we are entering a new Year of the Dragon, which generally promises to be successful and happy. It is their ultimate auspicious symbol that brings good luck – though not without its turmoil. Dragons are accompanied by thunder, lightning, noise and whirlwinds...they're all-powerful, but tempestuous and unpredictable.

This year looks to be one that the Chinese horoscope might just have absolutely right. Unpredictable, volatile, immense noise and distractions...yet it promises to be a good year for those who know how to survive the coming of the dragons.

It is not necessary to dwell upon the distractions and dramas of the last few years, or the ongoing issues and problems everyone still faces in 2012. Without doubt most advisers and businesses have been adversely affected recently, with many hit very hard in the last couple of years. For all that, there are still many advisers that have prospered during the difficult times, and it is worth sharing their success formula. All of them simply have firm foundations, and work hard on basics.

Those foundations that the robust advisory business share are:

- strong relationship management ability
- active listening
- being busy
- activity focus
- having clear vision

I deliberately omit areas such as education, technical competence, efficient processes, cunning strategy, beautiful branding and the likes that are often considered essential elements of a successful business. Such things are indeed essentials for professional business excellence, but they are not the foundations which advice businesses are built upon to begin with. The prosperous adviser businesses I've observed during recent years have been those that have ensured their continued focus is upon having the right foundations, before erecting the framing and dressage of professional competence or licensing status. The foundations make the difference to surviving the tempest.

Despite the trend for ever-improving technical competence – which is here to stay – providing advice remains mainly a “relationship business”. No matter how insightful or technically brilliant an adviser is, no business exists if a customer doesn't trust and want to work with you. Managing customer relationships involves constant communication naturally (are

you using Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, email newsletters, sharing valuable & useful content & advice?). Do you know, and concentrate upon, what your customers actually want from you? Do you know what they care about in life, and do you share yourself with them? That's the stuff of relationships.

The second element is actually listening to the customers. Not just physically meeting, or talking on the phone regularly, or even conducting satisfaction surveys (do you have processes to make these things happen?). It is all of those – but then responding with appropriate action. Active listening is being attuned to the customer, and acting upon what you learn to improve their experience, or relationship, or the value they get.

All this will keep you busy, and heaven knows there are enough other things that seem “urgent”. But are they “important”? Are you busy on stuff that makes a difference? The businesses that do well in tough times allow a lot of “stuff” to slide by without trying to address it, because they know what makes their boat go faster. Then they just get busy on the stuff that matters – which is a different sort of “busy”. Easy rule of thumb here: everything you do in your day either makes money, or costs money. Be busy on the first one.

Which of course should bring us to the “activity” part. Sorry, but there is simply no substitute for rolling the sleeves up and getting stuck in. As boring and simple as it appears, successful advisers ensure that the right amount of the right activity is happening. Call people, tell them your story, and find out theirs. Results come to people who hustle.

There is always the danger while hustling that you get caught up in the rush of it all. Focus, vision, a clear understanding of why you are doing what you do is essential. Clear vision guides the decision-making as to what is just urgent, or what is actually important, or where you should be hustling and who you should be concentrating on building those right relationships with. Have the end in mind from the beginning.

You may feel that such observations are a step back in time to a more gentle and naïve era. They are no step backwards, but amidst the noise and chaos those that are doing well keep the focus as simple as they can. Perhaps Einstein said it best: “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler”. It is simple ingredients that go into the foundations for success. These foundations support everything else you may want to build and will ensure that your practice prospers in the Year of the Dragon. **A**