The 10 golden rules

By Sarah Klein
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Think you've got the stuff to deal with the superrich? Then don your best Hermès tie or scarf, get out that pen (gold-plated, please) and jot down these tips:

1. Be discreet

Ultra-high net worth clients value privacy above all else. Watch for clues — such as hesitation — that a subject is off limits. In time, you will know most, if not all, of the family secrets. Your client needs to know you can keep them.

2. Know who signs your checks

Family wealth will span generations, but you will be accountable to a single person whose interests must come first. If the client doesn't want the kids or grandkids to know exactly how much money the family has, keep quiet. You'd be surprised how many young adults will ask, "Are we rich?"

3. Don't ignore the financial adviser

Even if a high net worth individual contacts you directly for a product or service, you should circle back to his or her principal adviser. Ignoring the adviser is a recipe for disaster. The advisers are there "to guide them through the decision-making process and to insulate them from individuals, products and services that are not acting in (their) best interests," Christopher Wright, managing director of the Chicago office of Foundation Source Philanthropic Services Inc.

4. Be patient

It may take as long as five years to convert a prospect into a client. In that time, you may be required to provide lots of free advice. Do so nicely and build a business model that is designed to handle it.

5. Don't turn green

Envy is inevitable, especially when the swimming pool for your client's dog is bigger than your town's aquatic center. To keep your jealousy in check, remember that many of the wealthiest folks got there by taking tremendous risk — risk you might not be willing to shoulder under similar circumstances.

6. Family first

Don't pitch investment models that will increase dissension, even if the returns are high. "Family dynamics impact quality of life more than anything else," says William I. Woodson, managing director of the family wealth management group at Credit Suisse Asset Management LLC in Chicago. Put them first.

7. Dress the part

Most of the professionals serving the high net worth market don't have a casual Friday. "It's a sign of respect for the client," says Thomas Handler, chairman of the advanced planning and family office practice group of Chicago law firm Handler Thayer & Duggan LLC. These clients expect the best — hence the $8,000 cappuccino machine in the office.

8. Get a personality

Your fine education in tax law and estate planning is not enough in this business. Clients with this much money expect you to be charming, too. "A lot of professionals spend a lot of time trying to convince their clients that they are smart. That should be an assumption. I don't mention code sections in the presence of my clients," says James Raaf, managing director of the Chicago office of Harris Bank's myCFO Inc., a financial services business for high net worth families.

9. Expect distrust

Wealthy clients tend to be more suspicious. Don't take it personally, and be prepared to justify your bills. The more transparent they are the better.

10. It's a small world

Remember, there's only one degree of separation between your clients and all the professionals in this very small market serving the ultra-rich. Be careful what you do. If you embarrass yourself today, everyone will know it by tomorrow.