



**Accountants need to develop better** client skills if they are to shake off the 'boring' tag, writes Peter Belsey. They already have, counters Tom Kelman

## Bored to tears

the  
debate

Cards on the table. I trained as an accountant and spent more than a decade as part of the audit team with a top UK firm before joining a behaviour change consultancy. I enjoyed my time there and found my colleagues to be highly personable and great fun.

So why do I believe accountants are boring – and, in so doing, risk biting the hand that feeds me? The answer is that clients find too many to be boring.

One client described the experience of meeting his accountant as being 'like a clipboard coming out', with a list of standard questions that meant little or nothing to him, before the accountant 'doctor' diagnosed the problem and prescribed the solution.

Another major accountancy firm was horrified to find a client survey painting them as 'arrogant' and 'insensitive' – close cousins to 'boring'.

So why do so many accountants appear to put on a front and not allow their natural personalities to come to the fore? Fundamentally, it's because they focus too much on the task in hand, rather than the individual sitting on the other side of the desk.

As a result, they act as the impersonal, technical and remote 'expert' – a problem exacerbated when using the naturally deadening written word to communicate financial information or advice. The skilled accountant by contrast, seeks to build a personal rapport and business relationship with the client, understanding their problems and influencing their thinking.

Historically, accountants were able to impress clients with the mystique of technical jargon as they took control of their affairs. But times have changed. Today, clients no longer want to entrust their financial management exclusively to a third party, but want to be actively and directly involved.

The bottom line is that the profession must adapt to changing expectations. Time was that 'boring' was not seen as an impediment, 'dull' was dependable and trustworthy. Today clients want their accountants to show greater dynamism and rapport in understanding and meeting rapidly changing needs.

The irony is that, by so doing they will be true to themselves.

*Peter Belsey is financial services sector head at Huthwaite International*

## Talk of the town

Are accountants boring? There may have been an element of truth in this statement in the past – but not now. When accountants talk to accountants, they use their own conventions to ensure that the message is not out-of-date, or more worryingly, wrong. A prime example of this is technical guidance or accounting standards.

Accountants are not unique in this respect – other professions use their own code. But I believe the balance of code and everyday language is changing as accountants adapt and have become more aware of their customers' need for them to be more visible and communicate in a way that is easy for non-accountants to understand.

As the role of the accountant has

developed, from the stereotypical number cruncher to all-round business adviser, they have had to evolve to keep up with the ever-changing demands of commerce and the public interest for clear, up-to-date guidance.

In some instances, accountants are leading the change. The best way to illustrate this change is to give an example of where an accountant has risen to the challenge and met the demand for better communication and visibility – Sir David Tweedie CA, chairman of the IASB.

The same can be said for the environments where accountants work. You will find accountants anywhere from a hospital or a television company to an accountancy prac-

tice or a farm. Almost every organisation requires accountancy support of some kind.

I would also suggest that if accountants were anything other than visible, good communicators then accountancy would not be in the good health it is and held with as high a regard as it is today by its customers.

Without the flair, integrity, dynamism, professionalism, energy, innovation, intellect, humanity and commitment that make a good accountant the profession would fall into disrepute. But I know this will never happen, as one thing a good accountant always does first and foremost is listen.

*Tom Kelman is director of finance at the Association of Accounting Technicians*