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How to Respond When a Client Resists Recommendations

By Barbara Kay, Author and Business Coach

Recently, my financial professional client, Steve, shared, “Barbara, one of my clients has started resisting my recommendations. I’ve tried to reason with her, but she won’t budge. I’m not sure what to do.”

Navigating such scenarios can strain client relationships. Fortunately, strategies exist to work through this type of situation and move forward. Let’s delve into how.

What We’ll Cover

- Why clients resist recommendations
- Common responses from financial professionals
- A more effective approach

First, Why Clients Resist Recommendations

Clients resist for various reasons, often influenced by the influx of conflicting information in this 24/7 news and social-media age. Emotional decisions, stemming from fear or desire, can be the root of resistance. Identifying these emotional drivers can be challenging for financial professionals, as clients may not readily reveal them.

Second, Common Responses from Financial Professionals

Financial professionals often fall into the trap of immediately providing rational explanations to be logically persuasive. While a logical approach can be effective in some cases, it may backfire if a client’s resistance has an emotional component.

When hesitant about a recommendation, a client might nod in agreement but claim they need more time to think about it. This socially acceptable answer looks cooperative but can lead to a frustrating pattern of resistance in one or more conversations. Steve was experiencing this with his client.

So, how should a financial professional respond if a client is resisting a recommendation?

Third, a More Effective Approach

When a client resists, pay close attention to their behavior. Are they calm and thoughtful? Are their reasons for waiting practical and rational? Or are they tense, worried, waffling, or stuck? Frowning, fidgeting, agitation, and repeated delays are all signs that emotion is hiding beneath the surface.

Any sign of emotion is your cue to shift from explaining to uncovering hidden concerns.

Ask your client: “It seems like you’re not confident in my recommendation. Can you share what concerns you about this?” Or “You seem concerned. Is there something that’s holding you back?”

Whenever emotion is part of the resistance, it’s important to understand what’s behind it. People get stuck emotionally because:

- Avoiding pain is more important than achieving gain
- Present feelings are far more powerful than future negative consequences

Imagine a client who keeps their wealth primarily in secure investments such as cash equivalents. This stems from a genuine fear of market volatility. Their financial professional, armed with charts and graphs, recommends a bolder approach—allocating a larger portion of their portfolio to equities to achieve their long-term financial goals.

Yet, despite the logical presentation, the client remains hesitant and distressed. The natural response is to keep focusing on facts. But this just increases the resistance since reason can’t solve an emotional concern.

Instead, consider an approach that helps the client feel the significant, long-term impact of their resistance:

- “I understand it’s important for you to feel financially secure. I agree! It’s my job to help you reach financial security over your lifetime. Let’s take a moment to imagine 20 years from now. You’ve stayed invested in secure, cash-based investments throughout that time. You’ve avoided any potential losses, but you haven’t seen much growth either. Now, imagine you look back and discover that investing in the market, even with some ups and downs, could have quadrupled your wealth. What would your future self say about the decision you’re making today?”
- (Pause thoughtfully)
- “Take a moment to imagine living in that future. Your friends, who took a calculated risk and invested in the market, now have the freedom to travel, enjoy fine dining, and even help their grandchildren with their education. You lost 20 years of growth and now live with much lower means; how would that make you feel?”

They’ll likely say that the cash decision isn’t the best choice for their future. This approach allows clients to feel the impact both financially and experientially, fostering a shift in perspective.

To Summarize

First, clients are bombarded with information that can influence them to resist your recommendations. Second, a purely rational response to an emotionally charged client is ineffective. Third, help clients who resist your advice feel the long-term effects by envisioning their future experiences.

My Client Found the Source of Resistance

Steve followed my guidance and shifted from a purely rational approach to understanding his client’s concerns. Over coffee, he actively listened and unraveled his client’s fears and prior financial setbacks. Through empathetic conversations, he tailored a personalized strategy that aligned with his client’s emotional comfort without compromising their financial goals.

The client, appreciating his genuine effort, embraced the revised plan. The approach not only transformed their professional relationship, but also led to financial success. Steve’s blend of empathy and expertise proved that addressing emotional resistance is pivotal in steering clients toward informed decisions.

Next Step

The next time you encounter a client resisting your recommendations, delve into the source of their emotions. Then, help them visualize the long-term effects of their resistance.

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Barbara is a business psychology coach specializing in: Growth, Clients, Teams, and Leadership. She holds dual degrees in clinical psychology and post graduate specialties in coaching. In addition to coaching and speaking, Barbara writes the leadership column for Journal of Financial Planning and is the author of two books: *The Top Performer’s Guide to Change* and *The $14 Trillion Woman: Your Essential Guide to Engaging the Female Client*.

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