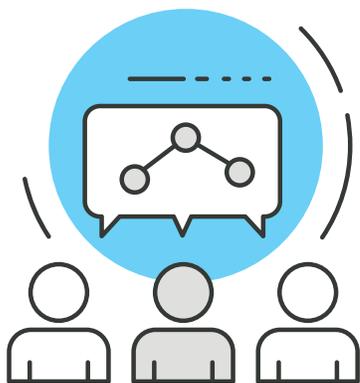


# Client Experience in The Modern Firm<sup>®</sup>



## Why client experience is important in a modern firm

Delivering a rich client experience—every time—is a key differentiator in modern firms, which is why we developed this eBook.

We'll first examine the client experience common in most firms. Then, we'll dissect the client experience into smaller pieces and discuss each individually.

Finally, we will conclude with where the marketplace is moving and the steps required to effectively move with it in order to offer a premium client experience at every level of interaction.

**Delivering a rich client experience—every time—is a key differentiator in modern firms.**

## Pay attention to client experience

Before digging into current trends and dissecting the components of client experience, it's first important to understand why client experience is a critical component of firm operations. According to Gartner Research:

**89 percent of businesses today expect to compete mostly on client experience, versus only 36 percent a few years ago.**

This is a dramatic shift. What is clear is that to effectively compete on a playing field that continues to level out, mastering client experience is key.

### But what is client experience?

There are plenty of definitions floating around. The following is the truest representation:

**Client experience: How you meet clients' needs at every point over the lifespan of the client-firm relationship.**

"Every point" is not an exaggeration. This indeed means every interaction you have with a client over the lifetime of the relationship. This begins with initial contact (the point the client became aware of your firm) to the final communication.

Today's clients expect to develop and desire to have a relationship with the organizations they conduct business with. And if that relationship is to grow and prosper, it comes down to how all interactions combined make the client feel. If their experience is superior, you have a client for life. If it's bad, you will most certainly lose out to a firm that has mastered the art of client experience.

What does your client experience look like?

# Client experience in today's traditional accounting firm

Client experience is a complex concept that consists of multiple processes, tools and touchpoints—each of which is largely disconnected from the others in the traditional firm.

When you think of a world-class client experience, companies like Starbucks, Amazon and Apple come to mind. It's the rare individual who thinks of an accounting firm first. And, yes, while these companies are large (with budgets to match), even accounting firms on scale with these retail giants have yet to master client experience.

Consider just a few common technologies that firms, both large and small, are still using today:

## ■ Email

Firms continue to use email as a primary communication tool, despite the fact that it creates communication silos among staff and is a highly insecure delivery tool.

## ■ Portals

While client portals are more secure than email, many portal platforms still have a long way to go in terms of user friendliness and offering a more modern look and feel.

## ■ PDFs (Portable Document Format)

Firms will typically send out tax organizers, tax returns and Form 8879, for example, as PDFs. These documents are usually static and require the client to print in order to complete and/or sign.

Considering these standard-use technologies, let's now look at a common client experience during tax season:

- The firm sends the tax organizer to the client either via email or client portal.
- The client must print the organizer, complete, scan and then send it back via email or upload to their client portal.
- After processing, the firm sends the tax return to the client via email or the client portal.
- When additional information is needed, the firm sends an email to the client. This process can go on for a while with emails back and forth between client and firm staff. This is where communications get siloed.
- The client will often respond to requests for more information by attaching documents and sensitive data within an email (high security risk) or calling the office for clarification (creates friction in the process).

From start to finish, it's a fairly disjointed process—one with many opportunities for information to fall through the cracks and providing little to no visibility end-to-end. What you are left with are several points of friction and a less-than-appealing client experience.

Now, let's dig a bit further into the issues with traditional methods...

# The insecurities of email

According to a recent study by Phishme.com, 91 percent of cyber attacks begin with a simple email. According to the American Bar Association, one out of three law firms has been hacked—which causes great pain to the firm, the clients and the firm's overall reputation. It's logical to think that if law firms are being hacked so readily, accounting firms are another big target.

**With 91 percent of hacks starting with email, everyone should be looking for an alternative and more secure communication method.**

While email is a tried and true communication tool—familiar and comfortable—it is highly insecure. The more firms stay in email, the higher the security risk—especially when you consider that clients are still attaching financial documents or spelling out sensitive information in the body of emails. With 91 percent of hacks starting with email, everyone should be looking for an alternative and more secure communication method.

Lack of transparency is the other core issue with email. The more clients email individual staff members, the more siloed communications become. Short of tapping into each employee's inbox, it is virtually impossible to gain visibility into the broad process, streamline client communications, or collect metrics on the client experience (response times, delivery turnaround and so on).

Large financial organizations such as Chase Bank, Bank of America and Fidelity Investments have changed their email behavior. These companies have banned operating within email. Based on this business model shift, we know changing email behavior is possible.

## The risk of sharing documents via links

Because sharing client data via email is not secure, some firms have adopted a hybrid solution. This solution allows firms to share documents securely behind a user login and then alert the client to the document via email (e.g., Dropbox, Box and Google Drive). Most often, a link is sent via email that directs the recipient to click the link and retrieve documents. While this may seem more secure, spoofed links are among the most popular phishing schemes.

Many firms adopted this hybrid solution because traditional client portals are less than user friendly. Historically, portals have been a simple extension of a firm's document management system, and not necessarily designed to support a modern client experience. The other big issue is infrequent use. For some clients, portals are used only once a year at tax time. This often causes user access frustration and ignites a slew of calls to the firm for a quick refresher course on logging in. Again, this represents a client experience filled with friction.

# What message are you sending?

The old ways of doing business are simply not sending the right message to your clients. Consider the following examples of client interactions and the impact on client experience:

## ■ Financial statements

Ask most clients if financial statements are put to good use, and most will offer a firm “No.” The fact is that multi-page financial statements are intimidating and confusing. Without the proper advisory support to complement financial statements, they are often set aside by clients and forgotten.

## ■ Tax organizers

Chances are if you prepare tax returns, you’re sending out a client organizer. You may be printing and mailing, emailing links to a PDF, or making organizers available within portals. No matter the method, consider the message you are sending clients by delivering a 25- to 50-page document for them to complete.

**Based on feedback collected from hundreds of firms, less than 20 percent of clients attempt to complete the tax organizer—and this is only partial completion.**

Based on feedback collected from hundreds of firms, less than 20 percent of clients attempt to complete the tax organizer—and this is only partial completion. So, why are firms still sending the tax organizer at all? Most will tell you that it’s a reminder of the start of tax season and an attempt to retain tax-based business. The bigger question is this: Isn’t there a better, friendlier way to accomplish this?

## ■ Engagement letters

If signed, most firms follow one of two processes for engagement letters. Either they are printed and mailed or delivered via a link through a document signature solution, which can be a significant security risk. Both processes are not representative of a modern client experience.

## ■ Invoice payments

Many firms use a practice management system separate from their accounting system, meaning that there is no integration of client payments. Clients are required to either mail a check or phone payment into the firm during business hours. This creates a level of friction for clients that is exceptionally inconvenient.

## ■ Appointment scheduling

How easy is it for clients and prospects to schedule an appointment with your firm? Again, this should be a frictionless, simple process. But for many firms, it requires an email or phone call to get the scheduling process started.

## ■ Video conferencing

How easy is it for your clients and prospects to get on a video conference call with you? Some solutions, like Skype and Google Hangouts, require all users to have an account, which creates an immediate barrier.

Delivering multi-page documents that are of little use to clients, failing to offer an online payment option or online scheduling feature, and/or utilizing less-than-user-friendly video conferencing solutions are all practices that negatively impact the client experience. You have to ask yourself what message this sends your clients, because it’s probably not a good one...and certainly not a modern one.

## What do clients expect from their accounting firm?

As the accounting profession continues to evolve, so do client expectations. It's no longer just about delivering a quality service. Clients expect to work with their accounting professionals in a modern way—they expect an experience that is rich, convenient and digitally driven. Heightened competition and the modernization of client needs challenge accounting professionals to find new and innovative ways to stand out from their competitors—while meeting the demands of today's instant-access-seeking clients.

### So, what do today's clients expect?

They expect a superior client experience...every time. They expect interactions to be personal and convenient, and to have an authentic relationship with their accounting professional.

Gene Alvarez, Managing VP at Gartner stated: "Customers will not tolerate companies that have amnesia when it comes to remembering them and their preferences for recognition. This makes it imperative for companies to recognize their customers and to serve them pertinent content that demonstrates the proper recognition and treatment."

Here's what we know: Client experience is everything today, and people are changing their buying habits based on it. So, how are you going to react?



**Customer experience is the last source of sustainable differentiation and the new competitive battleground.**

**Tiffani Bova**  
VP at Gartner

As you think through client experience in your firm, here are a few things to keep in mind:

■ **Make every interaction with your clients personal**

Use client data to bolster their experience. Send a birthday or anniversary card; have their beverage of choice ready before they arrive for the next onsite meeting; learn their communication preferences and preferred name when you contact them. Going beyond expectations is key.

**Going beyond expectations is key.**

■ **Make every interaction with your clients intentional**

Consider the client's perspective on every communication you send. Ask yourself, "How will this communication make my client feel?" With this in mind, before sending tax organizers, financial statements or other information, take a moment to consider why you're sending it and if it's the best form of communication.

■ **Make clients aware of firm features that will make their lives easier**, such as:

- On-demand appointment scheduling
- The ability to contact the right person via the right method (this is not the same for every client, and some may want to connect in different ways given the situation)
- Automatic notifications when action is required (while also understanding the client's preference on receiving alerts)
- Convenient, highly secure document and data sharing
- The ability to pay for services online at any time and from any device
- Simple document signing
- Easy-to-use, no-account-required video conferencing

■ **Create a client experience that is convenient and predictable**

For some clients, this may mean eliminating travel time and meeting via video conference. For others, this may be as simple as being on time and prepared for onsite meetings. In delivering items, this could mean anything from offering the convenience of digital signature to curbside service.

To sum it all up neatly, get to know your clients and be aware of how interactions with your firm make them feel. And then do everything you can to ensure a rich client experience every time.

# 4 steps to changing your client experience

## Step 1:

### Take an inventory of your current tools and processes

Inventory all the client-facing tools used in your practice. Consider, at a minimum, each of the following:

- Email
- Text
- Digital client payment option
- Digital document signing
- Video conferencing
- Appointment scheduling
- Client portal: For digital document delivery, document exchange and payroll document delivery

## Step 2:

### Educate yourself on modern tools that enhance client experience

These tools are represented here in two categories—administrative experience and accounting experience.

#### Administrative experience tools:

##### Zoom (Zoom.us)

A simple video conferencing tool that can be integrated into your website and does not require a user account for your clients. Zoom works from any device.

##### CPACharge (CPACharge.com)

A payment tool that can be integrated into a website to support secure online payments from clients. CPACharge should be integrated into your website.

##### Calendly (Calendly.com)

A user-friendly calendaring tool that allows clients and prospects to conveniently access firm calendars to schedule appointments. Calendly uses links and therefore should be used in partnership with a secure sharing platform.

#### Accounting experience tools:

##### QuickBooks® Online

Intuit's online version that supports browser and mobile.

##### QuickBooks® Desktop (hosted)

Intuit's desktop version that works from a browser. By using a hosting provider like Right Networks, QuickBooks Desktop can work from any device.

##### Bill.com

A digital accounts payable and receivable tool that integrates deeply with all QuickBooks products. Bill.com supports both browser and mobile.

##### RUN Wholesale Powered by ADP®

A cloud-based solution that provides your clients with access to all payroll information, while enabling clients' employees to manage their payroll information via a mobile app.

## Step 3: Pulling the tools together

Clients should connect with your firm from two places primarily—website and mobile app.

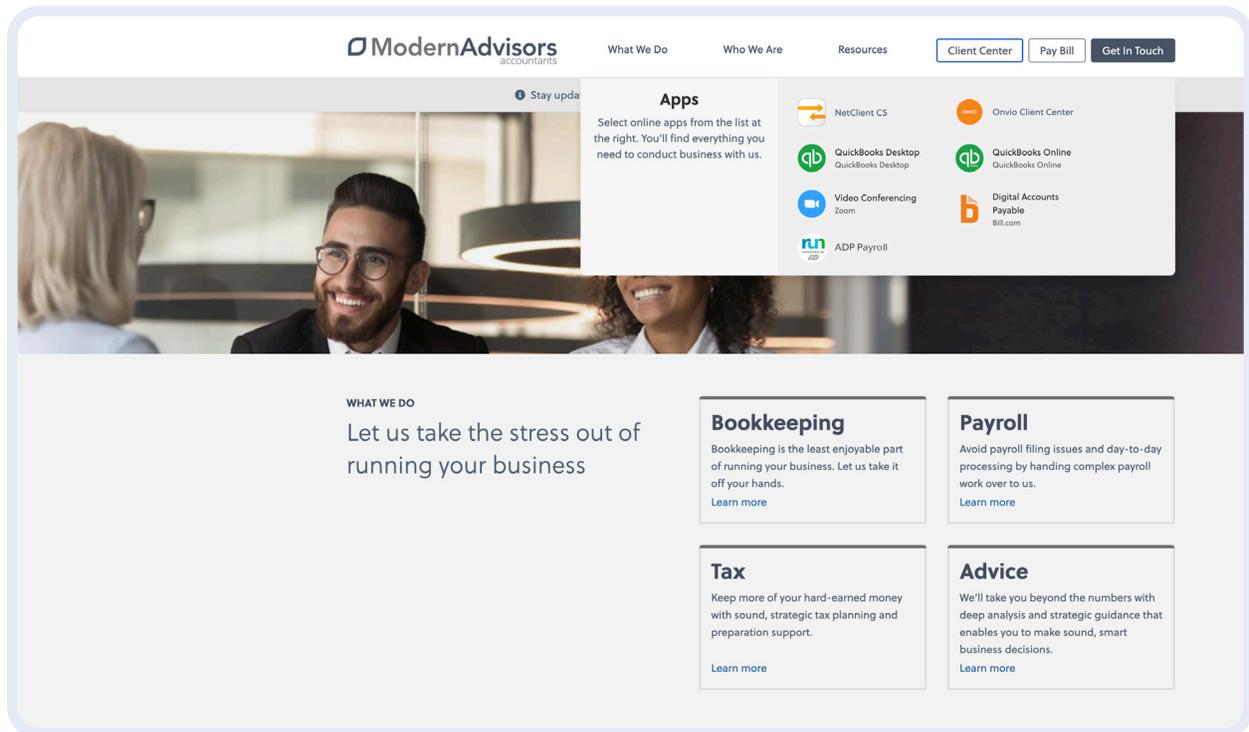
### Website strategy

Your website is where all of your client-facing technologies come together. For example, offering an organized client center with easy and convenient login options for QuickBooks Online and Desktop (hosted), Bill.com for accounts payable, and the secure client communications solution of your choice.

### The Modern Firm client center

Your website may also offer CPACHarge for receiving online payments from clients, Calendly for booking appointments, RUN Wholesale Powered by ADP® for payroll, and Zoom for video conferencing. This organizes your entire client experience model in a convenient and secure place.

Integrating these technologies advances your website to something far beyond a marketing tool. What you can offer now is a place for your clients to conduct business and collaborate with you.



Offer clients a single, organized and visually appealing place to login to their accounts from your website.

## Mobile strategy

Your website is where your client experience model comes together—the foundation to offering superior service. Mobile strategy is centered on the client and helping them develop a broad strategy to foster convenient access to all the data and documents within their larger financial world.

The client's mobile strategy starts with your firm. Offering clients a mobile-friendly website where they can easily access the items within your client center is key. However, beyond your firm's mobile experience, clients require your help to develop a larger mobile strategy that enables easy access to all their data. This represents another opportunity to enrich the client experience and the overall client relationship.

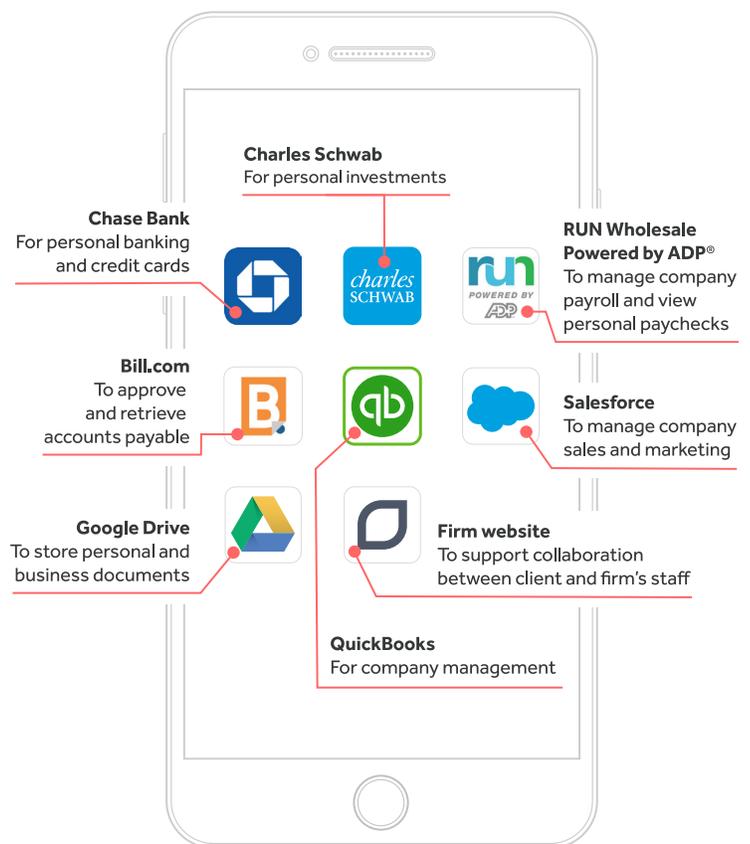
A client's mobile strategy is just as important as your website strategy when it comes to a great client experience. In order to be effective in today's mobile world, tools must be easy-to-use, effective and in your client's back pocket for ultimate convenience.

So, it's important to develop a mobile strategy that can be easily taught and adopted by clients. Clients will not, without your guidance, be able to conceptualize and execute their overall mobile strategy.

The image below offers a good depiction of a combined personal and business mobile strategy for clients.

With this set of tools in place, a client can be "in touch" with every aspect of their personal and business financial life. Each tool offers a unique value proposition.

Educate your clients on how to setup a folder on their mobile device with the tools that power their personal and business financial lives. You can even guide them to label the folder with your firm's name for easy identification.



*Help clients organize their financial lives on mobile to keep them working on-the-go.*

## **Step 4:** **Educate your team and your clients**

*Make a plan to educate your staff and clients to boost adoption of your website and mobile strategies.*

### **Educate your team**

Take your staff on a guided, detailed tour of your website and mobile strategies.

This offers a clear picture on how the pieces of your broad client experience strategy come together. Train staff on the functionality of tools and educate them completely on the value of each tool to your clients. With proper education comes buy in.

### **Educate your clients**

Educate all clients, new and existing, on your overall client experience strategy.

Ensure that clients understand the inherent value to them—that is, convenient, real-time access to data and docs via modern technologies, as well as the ability to develop an authentic relationship with your firm.



## Final words...

The pace of change in our profession is nothing short of chaotic. But with great disruption comes great opportunity. We live in an era where client experience is everything...the most powerful of differentiators. Modern firms are building client-centric business models, powered by the most advanced technologies, to ensure that clients receive a superior experience with every interaction and at every level of firm operations.

Client experience has never been more important. It's at the center of how clients are evaluating businesses. Ensure that your firm rates high!

### **Want to learn more about how to deliver a rich client experience?**

At Rootworks, our team is committed to helping our members create a positive and rich client experience culture. We are continually developing tools and resources to support our members in achieving this important goal.

**If you want to learn more, please contact sales at [membership@rootworks.com](mailto:membership@rootworks.com)**

