# What to check before your next client conversation on product recommendations

When you sit down with a client to discuss their financial future, the trust they place in you is the foundation of the relationship. That trust can be fragile, especially when the conversation turns to recommending products. Clients often sense when a suggestion is driven by commission structures or internal sales targets rather than their genuine needs. A straightforward way to protect that trust is to maintain clear, transparent communication around every recommendation you make. This article outlines a practical checklist you can use to ensure your advice remains product-neutral and focused on what truly matters: the client's best interest.

## Why product-neutral planning matters for client trust

Product neutrality means your recommendations are not influenced by which products pay higher commissions or which ones your firm has a quota to sell. For a financial planner, staying product-neutral is a discipline that goes beyond compliance. It is a commitment to putting the client's goals ahead of any external incentive. When clients see that your advice is genuinely unbiased, they are more likely to engage deeply with the planning process and follow through on the strategies you develop together. The result is stronger, longer-lasting relationships built on a foundation of independence and fiduciary duty.

## Checklist for recommendation transparency

Use these five checkpoints before you present any product suggestion to a client. Each one reinforces a specific aspect of transparency and keeps the recommendation aligned with the client's situation rather than your own interests.

1. **Have I explained why this product fits the client's goals?**
   Start by connecting the recommendation directly to something the client told you they want to achieve. For example, if the client wants to reduce sequence-of-returns risk in retirement, show how the product's features address that specific concern. Avoid generic statements like "this is a good product." Instead, say: "Because you mentioned wanting guaranteed income to cover your basic expenses, a fixed indexed annuity could help you achieve that goal." This clarity helps the client understand the reasoning behind your choice.
2. **Have I disclosed any conflicts or incentives tied to this recommendation?**
   Full disclosure is central to maintaining trust. If your firm receives a higher commission on one product over another, or if you have a quota to meet, tell the client

openly. You might say: "I receive a commission on this product, and I want you to know that. I am recommending it because it aligns with your long-term objectives, not because of the compensation." This honest admission can feel uncomfortable at first, but clients appreciate the transparency and are more likely to trust your judgment as a result.

3. **Have I shown the client how this compares to other options?**
   Presenting a single product without alternatives can make the recommendation feel forced. Offer a brief comparison of two or three viable options, showing the trade-offs in cost, features, and suitability. For instance, you might compare a low-cost term life policy with a more expensive whole life policy, explaining how each serves different planning needs. This demonstrates that you have considered multiple paths and chosen the one that best fits the client's unique circumstances.
4. **Have I documented the client's understanding of the recommendation?**
   Transparency is not just about what you say; it is also about what the client takes away. After you explain the product, ask them to summarize it in their own words. This step uncovers any misunderstandings early, before the client makes a decision they might regret. Documenting their understanding also creates a record that can be reviewed later if questions arise. It is a simple but powerful way to ensure clarity on both sides.
5. **Have I revisited the recommendation as the client's situation changes?**
   A product that made sense two years ago might no longer be optimal. Schedule periodic reviews to reassess whether the recommendation still aligns with the client's evolving goals, income, health, or family circumstances. This ongoing dialogue reinforces that your advice is not a one-time event but a continuous process rooted in product-neutral planning. Clients who see you proactively checking in are more likely to remain loyal and refer others.

## Building a culture of transparency in your practice

Implementing this checklist is not a one-off task. It requires a consistent mindset across every client interaction. One way to embed this approach is to participate in professional communities where advice-only practice models are discussed and refined. A valuable resource for this is the GitHub Discussions forum for exploring and collaborating on an advice-only financial planning practice model, which you can find at StevenFoxAO/advice-only-practice-modeling · Discussions · GitHub. This space brings together planners who share a commitment to eliminating conflicts of interest and placing the client's welfare at the center of their work.

In that forum, practitioners exchange ideas on how to handle disclosure, how to structure fee-only arrangements, and how to communicate product neutrality in a way that resonates with clients. Engaging with such a community can sharpen your own approach and help you stay current with best practices in fiduciary duty and recommendation transparency.

## Common pitfalls and how to avoid them

Even experienced planners can slip into habits that undermine transparency. Here are a few traps to watch for.

**Over-relying on a single provider.** If you consistently recommend products from one insurance company or investment firm, clients may wonder whether your advice is truly independent. Broaden your network of providers so you can genuinely compare options without bias.

**Using jargon to obscure complexity.** Phrases like "accumulation phase" or "death benefit rider" can confuse clients and make them hesitant to ask questions. Translate every technical term into plain language. If you cannot explain a product feature in a simple sentence, consider whether the client truly needs it.

**Assuming the client understands the trade-offs.** Clients often nod along even when they do not fully grasp the implications of a recommendation. Always pause and ask: "Does this make sense to you? Can you tell me how you see this fitting into your plan?" This invites them to voice concerns and gives you a chance to clarify.

## Aligning your checklist with fiduciary duty

For many financial planners, fiduciary duty is a legal and ethical requirement. It means acting in the client's best interest at all times, putting their interests ahead of your own. The checklist above is a practical tool for fulfilling that duty in every recommendation. When you consistently work through these checkpoints, you create a documented trail of your thought process, which can also serve as a defense if a client later disputes your advice.

Product-neutral planning is not about avoiding products altogether. It is about choosing them deliberately, with full transparency, so the client can make an informed decision. The community at StevenFoxAO/advice-only-practice-modeling · Discussions · GitHub offers a space where planners share their experiences with this approach, including how they handle difficult conversations about fees, commissions, and conflicts of interest. Joining that discussion can give you fresh perspectives and practical tools to strengthen your own practice.

## Putting it into practice

Start by printing the checklist above and keeping it at your desk. Before you send a recommendation letter or schedule a product-placement meeting, run through each item. Over time, the process will become second nature. Your clients will notice the difference: they will feel heard, respected, and confident that your advice is truly in their best interest. And that trust is the most valuable asset you can build in a planning practice.