

Delivering Value to Clients: Five Ways to Do It Better

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In the consumer driven world of the 1990's the legal profession has a lot to learn and understand about attracting and keeping its most valuable assets, namely clients. Potential clients are becoming aware there are many more choices in legal services than ever before.

From a marketing standpoint, clients are your most precious commodity. In most practices, the majority of new business comes from client referrals. Shrewd lawyers are discovering that it is no longer enough just to deliver good legal services. You must also deliver "added value" to your clients. Value is where the client perceives that the benefit received is considered to be worth more than the actual money spent.

The critical factor here is that value depends on the client's perception, which may have little to do with the legal issues. It means you can get your client a great result and still not get any referrals if you did not address his or her non-legal needs. To deliver real value to your clients you must understand what they expect from you. The easiest way to achieve this is to ask the client, even before you even get entangled into the legal matter at hand. This can be as simple as ascertaining what results they expect of you in the matter you are dealing with, or what they are looking for in a lawyer or a law firm. You can even ask them what they actually dislike about lawyers. They may even relate some bad experience they have had with a previous lawyer. Answers you receive to these sorts of questions will give you an excellent idea of how to please your client and how to avoid disappointing them.

In my vast experience of working within law firms, both here in Australia and overseas, there seem to be five main points which clients find most annoying about lawyers. Some of these complaints have led to non payment or delayed payment of bills. So it is wise to be aware

of them and act accordingly.

1. Lawyers Need to Escape To The Real World

All clients expect you to understand their specific needs and requirements. How lawyers think they can do this if they never leave their own offices is somewhat of a puzzle to me.

Often lawyers have no experience other than working in a law firm. Many have never worked in other industries. In the case of corporations or small businesses which use your services, a great deal of understanding and good will would be shown if you could schedule a meeting occasionally at the client's premises. Even better would be to ask the client if you could visit their premises in order to enhance your understanding of their business, even if you do not need to see them in respect of their particular legal matter (and do not charge them for the time - consider it an investment!).

Apart from the good will created, you will get to know members of the client's workforce.

This, in turn, may lead to further referrals. By talking to people at the client's premises, you may also gain an insight into the future plans of the client's business. This may well enable you to suggest when further legal services may be appropriately sought from your law firm. You may also be able to refer colleagues who may be of help in areas of law which are not your speciality.

It is also a good idea when the client visits your offices to introduce him or her to the rest of the legal team, including secretarial and support staff that he or she may come into contact with in the future.

2. Telephone calls are never returned.

I have lost track of how many times I have received complaints from clients



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about the lack of communication from lawyers. Understandably, there are times when lawyers are so busy they cannot possibly get back to all their calls. Looking at it from a client's point of view you can better understand why not returning your calls may in fact be costing you business.

Say Mr Jones calls you and you automatically prioritise his call relative to all the work that you have ahead of you today. Because of your workload you place his call about 20th on a list where you will only get 15 things done. You therefore feel it is o.k. to postpone the call. Tomorrow he is up to 18 on the list. The next day he is 16th. Before long, a week has passed and you have several messages from Mr Jones.

If we look at it from Mr Jones' point of view you will soon learn that clients hire lawyers for one reason, namely pain relief. They are paying you to relieve or prevent physical or emotional pain. To your clients, your services are not a discretionary purchase. They need you. When Mr Jones calls, you can bet that his call is number 1 or 2 on his priority list. You can also be sure that he is feeling pain. It may only be the pain of uncertainty, but to him it's no small matter. He is calling you for pain relief. If you don't return his call, you have added to his pain instead of relieving it. You have added frustration to his life. He hired you to relieve his pain, but instead you are increasing it. From his perspective you are not earning your money.

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To bring value to your clients, never finish the day's work leaving an unanswered phone message. If you are unable to answer the call personally, have your secretary or para-legal get back to the client to see if they can help. If they can't help, have them ask the nature of the call. You can then prepare for your return call. Call back the very next day without fail. Don't neglect your phone messages. It's like throwing referral business down the drain.

3. Lawyers Don't Listen

Most lawyers can gauge a situation rapidly, especially if they have a great deal of experience in a particular area. When they get the gist of the situation, they tell the client what he or she needs to do - but isn't that what the client hired you to do, you ask? Well, yes and no. Part of what the client has hired you to do is to understand their personal needs regarding legal issues. Most lawyers listen selectively to the client. They focus on the facts and ignore the emotions. However, the best lawyers take time to find out how clients feel about the facts. This creates the impression that the lawyer is really listening to them and cares about them. Even large corporate clients like to know that you understand their anxieties and frustrations.

Take the time to acknowledge your client's feelings. If you recommend a course of action, ask whether they feel comfortable with it. If they have reservations, reassure them. This kind of personal attention pays big dividends in additional referrals.

4. Promises, Promises

Commitment is like a magnifying glass. If you make a commitment, no matter what the results, they will be amplified. If you deliver on your commitments you will gain credibility. If you are late for your deadlines, the results are also magnified. You are now per-

ceived as undependable. Missed deadlines are always displeasing to the client. Lawyers often commit to unrealistic deadlines. To please the client, they promise work sooner than it is likely to be done. It is far better to be conservative and deliver the goods early, than to be aggressive and miss the deadline. If you promise the work Monday, and you have it Wednesday, the client is annoyed. If you promise it Friday, and deliver it Wednesday, the client is happy. The client usually has no idea how long it would take to complete the work. However, the client does know what you committed to do. When making commitments, give yourself some leeway wherever possible. You will make yourself look good when you come in ahead of schedule.

If you can't avoid missing a deadline, tell the client before the deadline passes. Then set a new deadline. This shows the client that you are considerate and that you take your commitment seriously.

Some lawyers who have been caught out by the client by missing commitments, try to avoid making any commitments at all. This is as bad as breaking a commitment. It increases the client's uncertainty, and to the client, uncertainty equals pain. It is better to make a commitment and revise it, than to avoid commitments all together. Better yet, make realistic commitments and deliver more than you promised.

5. How much!

Many clients go into shock when they see their bill. Even large corporate clients sometimes reel at the sight of their legal bill. Clients are often sceptical of hourly billings. They usually think the work could have been done in fewer hours. The best way to overcome this is to be sure the itemisation is adequately detailed. Clients get less perturbed when they know exactly what they are paying for.

You can also ease the pain a bit by sprinkling in a few "no charge" items on the bill. Most lawyers do some work they don't charge to the client. If you do this occasionally, make sure you note it on your bill so the client knows that they have got something for nothing. This creates good will and those non-billed hours will multiply into repeat business and referrals. If you believe in billing every second, consider investing a quarter of an hour here or there in your own future.

The Future for Legal Eagles Who Want to Soar

In my many years of marketing within the legal profession, I have noted that it is the small things which seem to mean the most to clients. To take a personal interest in them, to keep them well informed, to be honest and direct with them, and to make them feel as if they are the most important client that you have, is all an art which can be learned by anybody.

In many other businesses, professionals have to be well-rounded in their skill base. In nearly 10 years of working within law firms, I have often suspected that many lawyers have no further skills other than a knowledge of the law. Financial management, marketing, human resources, computer literacy and interpersonal skills are all areas worthy of further investigation by lawyers who wish to be successful.

In the 1990's it is no longer acceptable for a lawyer to lock themselves away from their clients and merely churn out legal work. Clients accept that you must be technically competent otherwise you would not be employed by a law firm. Nowadays the client is looking for added value in his or her relationship with a lawyer and the law firm. The lawyers who can deliver the added value and are able to empathise with their clients will be the ones who will build the most successful practices in the future.