to the needs of the client and people in general? Am I prepared to adapt to what they need? Can people trust me?'"

If the answers to all those questions are "yes", Ms Edmonds says, that tends to get around organically and new work follows.

Her interpretation is that fundamental to the marketing process for firms is demonstrating to clients and potential clients that the firm understands what "service" actually is and how the client's specific needs can be met, in a language that people understand.

"So much of the terminology we use is nonsensical to lay people. We need to look at communication from the outside in and make the effort to translate it. How do prospects or clients know that our services – or services they haven't used yet – would suit them if it's marketed using legal terminology."

Ms Edmonds says simple touches such as meeting a client at their house in the evening or office can make all the difference.

"Clients, like us, are time poor. Taking pressure off where you can makes a huge difference to the relationship.

"Our advertising and marketing strategies are tailored to the clients we work best for. My strategy is to expand my offering to clients we have, rather than generating large numbers of clients."

This is key to Edmond Law's client-centred model; investing time to understand how clients like to be communicated with, on what matters and their philosophy on issues.

Perception of value

People are increasingly looking for value in legal information, Otago University marketing lecturer Dr Tony Garry says.

Dr Garry says the perceived value of legal information hinges on the speciality of the advice and sophistication of the client.

Law is a credence service, he says, where laypeople use proxies to gauge value – the quality of interaction or even how someone is dressed – to gauge how valuable the service was that they paid for.

"By the same token, it's very difficult to make any price comparisons. And so for that reason we often tend to have an ongoing relationship with our solicitor because we trust them or they're friendly to us – and that's what the economists would call a difficult barrier to break down, if you were a competitor," Dr Garry says.

"But then you have the more sophisticated client like the blue chip companies or the more educated managing directors and so on. They're able to make a much better judgement of like-for-like."

Mr Garry says the commodification of the market means larger companies are demanding more from their law firms for a fixed fee.

Small to medium business, however, would require less sophisticated advice, placing more emphasis on trust and assurance.

"Small to medium – or the sole trader who's playing with his life work – he tends to be a bit more cautious, and there is room for a long-term relationship to continue."

Dr Garry says one could view the service in terms of the number of components it has.

He says if legal advice is the technical component, then the ability to gauge the quality of that is often related to the sophistication of the client; such as educational level and life experience.

it's 'horses for courses', deciding where value is added for particular clients ... and adjusting your service accordingly

"Then surrounding, you have the way the service is delivered. For example, how reliable the solicitor or law firm is in delivering that advice, how timely and how responsive they're and so on.

"I guess it's 'horses for courses', deciding where value is added for particular clients (the core or the way it is delivered) and adjusting your service accordingly," he says. ●

"Some loathe emails, some want to communicate by phone, some like meetings. Some people (mostly the entrepreneurs), avoid written communication altogether. My intent is to focus on understanding that for each client, so we as a team can deliver our service to our clients in exactly the way they like it."

This strategy helps in Ms Edmonds' pursuit to create a firm that is her clients' "go-to for legal needs and business strategic needs within the confines of the law".

To make them feel valued and looked after for the entire relationship is important, not just in the engagement phase.

"I am told sometimes by new clients who move to us from other practices, that they have previously felt that, once they were 'reeled in', they were relegated down the chain while their initial partner contact moved onto the next prospect. I would be horrified if a client felt like that about our practice. It is equally important to facilitate trust transference, so that clients can ask your staff for help, too, and feel that they know what's happening – at least on a general level – regardless of who they call.

"My orientation is towards clients as individuals or individuals within entities and their needs. That's why getting the back end administrative and compliance aspects as streamlined as possible is critical. As a strategy I want to workflow as many of our functions as possible to reduce the administrative time taken and complexity in providing our service. This is the only way small firms will survive the next decade."

Ms Edmonds says her referrers know the firm genuinely has a client-centric philosophy.

She tracks her billable hours and still mainly bills clients in a "value-based fee structure".

"I encourage clients to call me and chat with me so that the trust and depth of knowledge is enhanced. That's not something you bill for. It's part of marketing. It's part of strengthening a relationship."

Strong relationships

When the relationship is strong and true, clients treat you as a business partner rather than just another service, Ms Edmonds says.

"They are far less likely to replace you with a new, flashier model. At the end of the day, I still think for most matters, except for the truly transactional, law is a deeply personal offering."

Other forms of marketing – that most firms should have cottoned on to by now – include web presence and digital marketing, as well as attendance at professional functions and forming strong networking relationships within the industry with other practitioners.

When the relationship is strong and true, clients treat you as a business partner rather than just another service...

Ms Edmonds says it all goes to ascertaining exactly who the firm wants to act for and then determining what channels to use to get to them.

"Referrals are always the best clients. They come pre-qualified, usually from people we trust. Mostly that ensures we are well matched.

"To continue to grow, we will need to expand our channels. For now, we are taking one step at a time, honing our offering, so that customer service can be maintained while we develop the business aspect," the law firm principal/business entrepreneur says. ●