



Challenging your ideas about client expectations

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In our last article *Identifying the Current Inefficiencies in Your Legal Services*, we looked at how there is a time cost associated with every task involved in providing a legal service. What those time costs look like depends on the way that you choose to provide the legal service and the impact of a client's work, family and other commitments. These time costs generally add up quickly, which causes inefficiencies in your legal services.

Did you manage to identify the time costs for each step in the process for each of your legal services? Was it a surprise? Did you make any quick changes to reduce the inefficiencies?

In this article, we'll challenge your ideas about client expectations. What do your clients expect from your legal services? I have no idea. Do you?

First, think about your practice's target client

Who are they? What characteristics do they have? Where do they live? Why do they come to your practice? How do they engage with your practice? Take a couple of minutes to write down a few notes.

There's a very good chance that what you just did was subconsciously take your idea of what your practice's target client is and transfer your feelings about people with similar characteristics onto that idea.

Let's take the example of a target client being a small business owner who needs assistance with contracts to run their business. I tend to think of small business owners as male or female around 30 to 50 years of age who are well educated, are hardworking and are time poor. They tend to live out of major cities in houses large enough to raise families. They come to my practice because they have a positive experience, and my legal services are affordable. They engage with my legal practice online, so their location doesn't matter. It's no coincidence that I have similar characteristics myself and tend to surround myself

in social and professional circles with people with similar characteristics.

Do your notes truly reflect your practice's target client? Let's check with your team. Ask your team to take a few minutes to answer the same questions about your practice's target client. Who are they? What characteristics do they have? Where do they live? Why do they come to your practice? How do they engage with your practice?

There's a very good chance that what your team did was exactly what you did. Except that now you have multiple answers. How similar or different were each of the characteristics? Does it reflect similarities or differences in your team's characteristics or their previous experiences with similar clients? Ask your team.

At this point, you probably have a wider range of notes on the meaning of a small business owner who needs assistance with contracts to run their business. So, who is your practice's target client? Let's check with your target client. If you have a few clients that you know well and trust, see if you arrange a coffee catch up and have a casual chat to find the answers to the questions. You might be pleasantly surprised.

Now we need to combine all this information to describe your practice's target client more accurately. The details that keep appearing, again and again, are a good description of your practice's target client. The details that seem to differ across descriptions are examples of the range within your target client. You'll need to remember to provide options within the steps of your legal solutions to cater for these variances. If each of the descriptions of your practice's target client is vastly different, you probably need to go back and redefine who your practice's target client is before going through the exercise again.

Next, think about their expectations

What does your practice's target client expect from your legal services? Get your team to write some notes down and compare them. Were the notes generally the same? What were the similarities or differences? How does it compare to your notes?

There's a very good chance your team used *their perceptions* to use the information they've gathered about *their idea* of your practice's target client through *their own* life experiences. They then used their perceptions to assess what *they believe* are the expectations of your practice's target client.

Are you confused? If I think of a small business owner as being a hard-working male tradesperson aged 40 years, then my ideas of their expectations will depend on my previous life interactions with hard working male tradespeople aged around 40 years. I, therefore, expect that they'll expect my practice to provide a legal service that is very convenient to fit with their busy schedules. And because I think they are generally busy and generally run their businesses on the go from a ute, I expect that they'll expect that my practice will sort through all of their business information for them.

Okay, so your notes and your team's notes may not be the most accurate. Are you able to have a longer coffee catch up with your trusted clients? See if they are willing to tell you more about their expectations and why they have those expectations.

Great, I can combine these results to get the expectations for my practice's target client. Um, no. Sorry. There are a few other things to consider. Each set of notes you now have were based on the author's perceptions from their own life experiences. Each of those perceptions also depends on the purposes of the author at the time of taking in the information, the social context, and how well they remember the details. Then all of this information is remembered using stereotypes.

Stereotypes are useful when you need to make a quick decision about a situation but can be fairly inaccurate when you need to come to a comprehensive assessment of the expectations of one example person. Our human brains may also interpret certain client expectations as being more or less important, depending on our perceptions of the target client.

So, what do I do? You have your notes on client expectations together with those from your team and your trusted clients. Compare them. Are there any similarities or any differences? What were they?

If there were lots of similarities, it seems that you have a good definition for your practice's target client and both you and your team understand them well. You should have no trouble with developing legal services that are tailored specifically for them. We'll take a look at this in our next article. In the meantime, try to look through the legal services you currently offer and check if each step in those services meets the expectations of your practice's target client.

If there were lots of differences, think about whether those differences reflect the diversity of your practice's target client or whether you might need to go back and further refine your practice's target client. Then go through the exercise again. You'll need to make sure your legal services cater to that diversity. We'll take a look at this in our next article. In the meantime, try to look through the legal services you currently offer and check if each step in those services meets the expectations of your practice's target client.

Now let's do a reality check to help counteract any stereotypes that may have unintentionally crept in your and your team's notes. In essence, our clients come to our legal practices to receive a service. Those same clients also go to other businesses to receive non-legal services. What are the client service features of services that your practice's target client would receive from other businesses? Are the expectations of your practice's target client vastly different between receiving legal services and non-legal services? Why? If there are vast differences, think about whether that's a good thing or not. If the expectations are for a much lower standard of service from lawyers generally, then take it as a sign that the way we lawyers provide legal services needs to change.

Now you have a good idea of the expectations of your practice's target client. Well done. Were you surprised by what you discovered throughout this exercise? ■

In our next article, we'll look at ways to be innovative when providing legal services to your practice's target client to exceed their expectations. *Would you like input into our next article?* Please send me an email describing what you found after doing this exercise. Email me at deborah.vella@supportlegal.com.au.

You're welcome to join our community group for legal professionals who have an interest in being innovative in legal practice. The group provides opportunities for collaboration, connection, exploring and sharing with like-minded legal professionals. See more at www.supportlegal.com.au/community-group/



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