

Client Service As a Business Development Strategy

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Doing Good & Building Your Practice Big Time

Creating and fostering excellent relationships is the key to becoming a rainmaker. Providing existing clients with extraordinary service is every attorney's and law firms' ticket for prosperity.

Client Service by the Numbers

Providing excellent service to clients pay off big time. Studies indicate that 80% of new business comes from existing clients in the form of repeat work, new work for other firm attorneys, and internal and external referrals for new work. Furthermore, the benefits of retaining existing clients are huge. The profitability of a law firm that retains 98% of its clients is far greater than a firm retaining 95% or less of its clients.

Research studies of corporate counsel in companies of varying sizes consistently find that client service issues are the most important factor in continuing to retain outside counsel. A very recent study of Fortune 1000 companies shows that many corporate clients are dissatisfied with their law firms; only 24.7 percent of companies recommend their primary law firms. A majority state that they are not satisfied with outside law firms not because of their legal expertise but primarily because of the poor client service they receive.

Client Service and Business Development

Why does excellent client service generate new business? The reason is simple. Most buyers of legal service want and need personalized, responsive, trusted relationships with legal advisors because business and legal issues are complex. Excellent service and positive relationships provide comfort and build confidence. It is not difficult to hire competent outside attorneys. However, competent attorneys who also have excellent service and relationship skills clearly have a competitive edge. Excellent client service skills fuel repeat business and yield a high return on investment.

What Constitutes Excellent Service?

Demonstrate That You Care

The most frequent reason clients switch to another law firm is that their attorney fails to show they care. The phone calls aren't returned promptly, the status requests aren't responded to, and requests for simple changes are ignored. Not being responsive demonstrates that you don't care. Clients understand that attorneys are human and can make mistakes. When kept informed, mistakes can be excused. However, there's no excuse for not communicating promptly. That's why clients switch. Attorneys who excel

at being responsive and communicative and excel at meeting clients' legal needs have growing practices and originations.

Be Reachable

Clients have emergencies and crises. Lawyers who make themselves available to respond to client emergencies throughout the day, seven days a week, build client trust and loyalty. Attorneys should not offer this kind of accessibility to all clients at all times, but when there are critical periods in preparing and managing client matters, being totally assessable speaks volumes. A client who can't get their lawyer during critical times, will find another lawyer. However, if a client abuses your accessibility, set limits skillfully and they will show you added respect.

Show Respect by Involving the Client

Asking a client their opinion shows that you are interested in them and that they are an important part of finding solutions to problems. Ask them, "What do you think we should do?" and listen to their responses. Keeping the client in the loop is another form of respect. It doesn't matter if you think an issue is trivial. If the client thinks that an issue is important, it is important, and the attorney needs to keep the client regularly informed as a sign of respect.

Open Pandora's Box and Get Rid of the Contents

The conventional wisdom is not to open Pandora's box. Don't ask about what is not going well. Wrong answer. Clients will tell you the big things that dissatisfy them, but they are unlikely to tell you about the small things that can pile up and cause resentment. However, they will tell others about their dissatisfaction and shop for a new attorney without telling you until it too late. I once conducted a client interview for a highly respected law firm. When I asked why the client's use of the law firm had fallen off over the last five years, I expected some very plausible business reason for the decline. What I found instead was a client service issue. Five years earlier, the client had been promised a deliverable from the lead attorney on a given day. The deadline passed without the finished documents and without a call from the attorney. Five days later, the client received the documents without a comment about the lateness. This had been the second time something like this had happened and as a result, the client had begun using another law firm while the business given to his original attorney had quietly and steadily declined.

By asking clients to evaluate your legal team's expertise, service, and relationship skills you create opportunities to change what needs fixing before they seek other counsel. Listening to clients' concerns without being defensive, probing clients for specific examples, and asking them about how they wish you to do things differently, creates opportunities for more business. Clients will tell others to hire you, increase their loyalty to you, and give you more work. Usually, clients concerns are easy to fix, and fixing them creates more good will than you ever expected.

Build a Good Relationship with Clients

Most attorneys are very skilled at logical, analytical thinking required for problem solving. What many lawyers lack and/or undervalue are relationship skills. Relational skills build strong practices. The ability to anticipate how a client is likely to be affected emotionally by your actions or inaction and the ability to take the client's perspective work wonders. Interpersonal skills enhance relationships, increase mutual positive regard, and can go along way in creating a continuous flow of new business.

Be Proactive and Get to Know the Client on a Personal Level

You can become friends with your clients or not. It's a personal choice, but it's important to develop a personal relationship with clients over and above the legal work. This can be as simple as knowing what sports they like or having a conversation about their child's scouting project. Showing concern and, when appropriate, offering advice about their sick spouse, career advancement, or their children's college admissions puts a human face on a business relationship. It builds a personal relationship that makes doing business with you over another equally qualified attorney an easy choice.

Become an Advisor by Building Trust

Trust is priceless. Without it, even good legal work is suspect and business development almost impossible. Trust grows when you competently provide the legal expertise to solve client issues or when you refer the client to another attorney with the skills and experience to better resolve the client's issues. These acts build trust.

Trust increases when you deliver what you promised when you said it would be delivered. Keeping your word, delivering the promised work on time, or informing the client of delays (before the deliver date) demonstrates respect, and that builds trust.

Attorneys who take the initiative to provide clients with useful business and personal advise or to visit the clients at their workplace will open new business opportunities as a natural flow of building trust.

Clients want to be able to trust their attorney. If you show respect, provide good service and competent legal and business advice, and provide "on time" deliverables, you will gain your clients' trust, generate loyalty, and attract their new business.

Nurture Clients

Most people thrive when nurtured properly. Nurturing a client properly means anticipating what they need and providing it in a way that is easy for them to receive. Attorneys built sizable practices by researching client needs, finding and sending clients articles and alerts that give them useful information, and later calling or visiting clients to follow up.

Different clients require different kinds of nurturance. Some need a business meeting over lunch, some need to bounce an idea off you during a game of golf or while attending a basketball game, and some need to work with you on a charity event you both endorse. Tailor the nurturance to the specific client and you and the client will enjoy it.

Get Started and Build Your Return on Investment

The term client service sounds misleadingly simple. We all have relationships with clients. We all try to build trust, show concern, and provide service. However, like becoming an excellent technical lawyer, excellent client service takes a commitment to learning and a willingness to objectively assess your performance and seek improvement. Very few people naturally excel at anything. To excel requires dedication to mastery, training, and a lot of practice. The reward of excellent client service is a steady flow of work and a career in which you have loyal clients who want what you have to offer even when economic conditions are poor and business activity is slow. When they have legal needs, they turn to you. When their colleagues and friends have legal needs, they send them to you with an unqualified endorsement, and when they need personal attention, they seek you out. If you want to know if learning and practicing client service excellence is worth the investment, ask any rainmaker.