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Examine your law practice through your clients' eyes

Commentary by
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Have you looked under the hood lately? Do a client service maintenance check to grow your business.

Here is the new rule in 2013-14 for successful business development. Ready? It doesn't matter what you think — it only matters what your clients think. Therefore, now more than ever, it is important to see your practice through your clients' eyes — rather than assuming that everything is OK and you are beloved.

Over the past two years, I have been hired to act as a "secret shopper" by several very astute major law firms. My secret shopping uncovered the following:

■ Lawyers and secretaries not returning emails and voicemails — even when, and especially when, I expressly asked for help with a legal matter.

■ Old, poorly decorated and, in some cases, dirty reception areas and conference rooms that suggested, in a silent way, the caliber of the firm's practice.

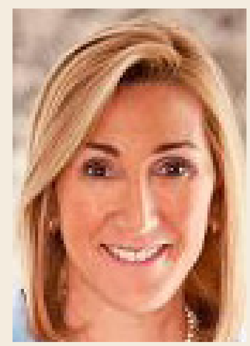
■ Websites overcrowded with text, containing links that no longer worked and pages that were unviewable on smart phones.

■ Malfunctioning voicemails rendering me unable to leave a message or get to a human.

■ Clients dissatisfied with the service they had received.

■ Incorrect addresses (email and snail) and phone numbers for clients.

■ Invoices sent to clients that did more harm than good — and not because of the dollar amounts but because of the lack of information they contained.



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And this is just some of what I found.

Here are some of the key areas to be sure you have a "meeting of the mind" with your clients at the inception of the relationship:

■ Responsiveness: Have you asked your clients how they define responsiveness so you are meeting their criteria? Do you return calls and emails within two hours? If you don't, does someone on your staff intercede on your behalf and personally reach out to the client? Have you explained this to your client? This is a critical discussion to have when you open a new matter.

■ Communicativeness: Ask clients how often they would like to be updated on the matter and sent documents. Don't assume that your definition of communication is the same as theirs.

■ Accessibility: How easy is it to find you or one of your colleagues if there is an emergency? Set up procedures with your staff so that a client can always talk to a live person on his or her team — whether it be a secretary or managing partner of the firm. Communicate this to your client.

■ Invoices: How much detail will appear on them? What does the client want? How will you avoid surprises and going over budget?

Be a client for a day.

Call your office after hours and during hours and listen to how warmly you are greeted. Listen to your voicemail message. Does it provide helpful information? Instead of saying you are out of the office, does it describe what you are doing and when you will be checking your voicemail? If you are taking a deposition in Kansas and will be checking your messages every three hours, state that. That is actually helpful and informative to the caller.

What is it like visiting your office? Is the reception area pristine or in need of repairs? What does it silently say about your practice? Are the magazines on the reception area dated or inappropriate for the kind of client visiting your office? Are there any newsletters or articles you have written out on the table? How does the receptionist behave? How welcoming is he or she (does he or she greet visitors by name, offer a drink, help with parking and more)? Ask yourself how you would like to be greeted.

Is your website responsive to smart phones? Test it. If your website is older than two years, it may not be. How is the content of your website or blog? Do both provide visitors with anything of real value?

What else should you look at from the client's perspective?

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■ Do you understand your client's business — how he or she makes money and what his or her business challenges are? You must.

■ Who does your client report to? A board, a CEO? Make an effort to make your contact look good to those he or she is beholden to.

■ Do your invoices give the client the detail he or she needs to see if you are on-budget?

■ Is succession planning in place and does the client know how his or her matters will be ably handled if something happens to you?

■ Do they know your strategy for the case? Ask them specifically how much they would like to be part of the strategy formation.

■ How nice you and your staff are to them. Take time to get to know what gets them excited and talk to them about it — whether it be sports teams, the ballet, their family or some obscure hobby. Take an interest in them. It matters.

Stacy West Clark is president of Stacy Clark Marketing, a firm that helps law firms and lawyers grow their businesses.