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10 Ways to Improve Law Firm Client Service

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It's funny. When I ask lawyers if they are delivering outstanding service to their clients, they always seem to answer, "You bet!" Everyone thinks their service is tops. But when you talk to clients, and ask them for their views on the type of service they are receiving, most give their firms a "C" grade.

We know outstanding service is important. Clients have choices. There are more than one million pretty talented lawyers in the United States all competing for clients. What separates them is the kind of service – not just the legal product – they provide. And clients are actively seeking out terrific lawyers who not only deliver the goods (that is now assumed), but do so in such a way that they are exceedingly responsive, accessible and provide advice in the context of what will truly benefit their client's world.

So what is outstanding service? Here are the five fingers on the hand: incredible responsiveness, accessibility, excellent communication in the manner the client has pre-selected, a thorough understanding of the client's world, goals and business and the personalization of the service. I like to call this last one "value added services." Clients will not complain about hourly rates, or look to find a new firm if these items are all in place and you as their lawyer are constantly looking for ways



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to deliver value to them beyond the legal services being delivered. (See my previous article, "25 Value-Added Free Services to Offer Your Clients.")

So how do you assess whether your service meets the mark? Here are 10 things you should do:

1. Most importantly, ask your clients.

Ask them before you start a matter how they want to be communicated with regarding their case – e-mail/ phone calls, how often would they like status reports, would they like to be included in the strategy sessions and more. I give my clients a checklist to follow when they meet with a person for the first time, which helps them ensure that they and the client are on the same page from the start. And ask clients at the conclusion of the matter: How did we do? What could we have done better? And more. And then – hold on to your coffee, folks – implement their suggestions! Act on their comments and let them know that you have.

2. Ask your entire payroll.

By this I mean, ask secretaries, receptionists, lawyers, clerks, paralegals – everyone – for their input on how the firm can ratchet up service to clients. Ask your staff if there are any impediments to each and every person delivering great service – "My attorney never tells me where he is going," "We do not have a backup emergency plan when I am out of the office," "Our parking situation is horrific" – then jump into action and fix these things.

3. Be a client.

Sit in the reception area and sit in conference rooms. In fact, tour your whole office with a view toward what the client's "experience" of being in your offices is like. Little things matter. Is your furniture stained? Are the brass door handles showing an inordinate amount of scuffing? Are the magazines very outdated? How does the receptionist treat guests? Are they greeted by name and welcomed, given a beverage etc.? The condition of your offices leaves a definite impression with a visitor. Do not let that image be one of a sloppy, uncaring and lackluster place.

4. Be a client, part II.

Check all points of entry a client has to your firm. Call your voicemail, your secretary's and your paralegal's. Is the message helpful? Does it get you to a person if the caller needs

a person ASAP? Does your e-mail provide a signature that includes your address and your secretary's contact information so that someone getting an e-mail from you can find you and get to your office? Does your secretary's voicemail state that he or she is your assistant and how to get out of his or her e-mail and reach a real life person? It should. Check this.

5. Designate someone in your firm to be a "secret shopper" client and test your firm's responsiveness to e-mails, phone calls and website-based inquiries.

You may be hugely surprised to see what you discover.

6. Hire great people.

I know this goes without saying, but many firms do not specifically look to employ people-liking, people-pleasing employees. It is really, really hard to teach people to be nice and service-focused when they are just not like that by nature. Therefore, as part of your recruiting efforts for both staff and lawyers, make sure each employee is the kind of person that likes to smile, that is solicitous and likes to help people. In addition, make sure all new hires know that going the extra mile is part of the job. You want to hire people interested in the success of your firm. Take a lesson from Zappos, the online shoe company known and applauded for its outstanding service. The company has a rigorous and energetic customer service training program for new employees. At the end of the training period, if the customer service rep thinks he cannot live up to the company's expectations and service creed, he is paid \$1,000 not to accept the job. Zappos is that serious

about hiring the right people who will be exemplary representatives of the company.

7. Check your forms.

Do your intake form, new matter form, mailing list customer relationship management forms, etc., help your firm stay on top of service? Check what questions you ask. Do you get enough personal information? Business information? Do you know the names of the client's secretary and key staffers? Do you know the names of their kids and spouse? By gathering the right type of client-specific information at the inception of the relationship, the lawyer will be better able to "understand" the client's world and personalize the service he or she receives.

8. Be generous with praise for great client service.

That's right. In meetings, the department head should publicly thank the employee or lawyer. The managing partner should send the staffer a personalized thank you and recognition letter. Applaud your folks in the firm newsletter and post something on the employee bulletin board. Send out an e-mail to all personnel. Consider awarding gift cards and other fun incentives.

9. Create a culture of client service.

The Ritz Carlton has a wonderful program called WOW stories. Every day, around the world, employees of the hotel chain gather for a 15 minute staff meeting where WOW stories are told. These are "true stories of employee heroics that go above and beyond conventional customer service expectations" according to

Carmine Gallo of *Bloomberg Business Week*. Gallo says telling these stories accomplishes the dual goals of giving public recognition to an employee – a great motivator – and further reinforces customer service as an integral part of everyone's job.

10. Look for examples from non-legal experts as to how they ratchet up service.

Lance Nelson, managing partner of Chester County's MacElree Harvey, draws upon writings in the general business world to inspire and teach his lawyers and staff how to do better and reach higher in terms of delivering top legal work and service. He regularly shares great articles and ideas from *The Harvard Business Review*, *The Wall Street Journal* and books like "Good to Great" by Jim Collins with his lawyers. A terrific idea indeed.

This is a huge area for firms to focus on right now. Most firms have a very long way to go to enhance the level of their service to clients. But if they put in the time, it will be well worth it. Happy clients beget happy referrals and more clients. I have never seen it fail. So if you are looking for a sure fire way to increase revenue, focus on improving your service to clients.