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2022 Advice for Everyone From an In-House Counsel Who Hires Law Firms

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Special to the Legal

I had an eye-opening lunch recently with an area associate general counsel of a major U.S. company with over 1 million customers. This in-house counsel hires and oversees the majority of law firms that conduct litigation on her company's behalf.

When this in-house counsel started with her company several years ago, the company was using hundreds of outside law firms. Today, they work with 10, that's right—10 go-to law firms as local counsel.

Because she had a lot of incredibly helpful things to tell me about her relationship with outside law firms—I agreed to give her and her company anonymity.

Most of the law firms I help do not work with in-house counsel at major corporations. However, her message is informative for lawyers in any size law firm—So please read on.

- When she was hired, one of the first things she did was to take



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inventory of the hundreds (yes hundreds!) of law firms her company was employing. Those who were kept on her short list really “got what we wanted to do.” Those are her words. It can not be overstated how important it is for law firms to totally immerse themselves in the world of the client and actively understand their goals and challenges.

- This in-house counsel prefers working with lawyers who are truly “experts” in their respective fields. She especially wants to work with lawyers who can give her a succinct answer on the phone—rather than say, “I’ll get back to you—let me check.” This advice makes me want to stress the need for lawyers

to try to specialize in niche areas and own thought leadership in that space. This translates into writing, speaking, presenting, leading—and engaging properly in social media—all to demonstrate you are the “go-to” experts.

- This associate general counsel sets expectations and defines what success will look like with her outside attorneys right from the start. She has given her law firms her self-proclaimed “Golden Rules for Representing Us” (including items like four people should not do the job that one lawyer can) and has explained what she wants to try in court and what kinds of matters should be settled.

- This position was her first stint in a certain national industry—so when she started, she made friends with in-house lawyers at other companies in the same industry to get recommendations on great law firms and lawyers to hire. It helped. Today, this associate general counsel still relies on her colleagues' suggestions as well as take recommendations from nonindustry

company in-house counsel as well. Lessons to lawyers who want to represent companies with in-house legal departments: word of mouth between in-house lawyers is still a top tool in seeking out a lawyer. You, your work and how you treat the client is being evaluated and remembered.

- This associate general counsel asks her outside firms to introduce her to younger lawyers on her company's team. She wants to know who is in the firm's pipeline to help her in the future. This is a huge message to law firms to purposefully groom and educate junior lawyers on what outstanding service looks like—because even though they may not be a partner, they are being considered and evaluated by the client for a long-term relationship.

- Take note: One Am Law 100 firm did something that this associate general counsel really loves: They sent her an associate for a week to really get to know her team and how the widget is made.

- Yes, she is a female in-houser. And yes—women's events are important to her. She has attended women's forums put on by midsize and large law firms, listened to impressive presentations and thereafter hired these female lawyers.

- Her favorite client alerts from law firms are those that arrive minutes after an event happens and are personalized to her situation; not mass mailings sent out a few days after an event. Law firms should take this advice to heart and

write extremely brief alerts that are sent out ASAP when the news occurs—and are personalized to clients. Next time, send your top-10 clients an actual short note with some recommendations on what they should consider doing based on the hot development.

- Because there have been emergencies, this associate GC likes her outside firm to respond as

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one of her firms did recently: “I understand your problem. When and where do you need me? I will be there.” Do you respond in this way when your clients call with a crisis?

- This associate GC provides feedback to her firms on an almost daily basis. Additionally, she does participate, when asked, in formal client satisfaction interviews with her law firms. Of particular note, was one firm who had gotten her company a terrific result and still said at the interview “we think we will do X differently next time to save you time and money.” What a fantastic thing to do for a client—a true value-added service.

- Law firms should show all value-added services they provide on the invoice—always. If something has been done for free—describe it. This associate GC is tasked by her general counsel with being as efficient as possible. An invoice that details the items of significant cost-savings or value added by certain tasks you performed will help her demonstrate how, if you are the firm she has hired, she you are doing just that. Make your in-house lawyer client “look good” to their superiors. Understand their world.

I don't care if you are a solo or from a small county firm: Heed this associate GC's advice with respect to your own clients and you will have a more profitable and happier practice. Let me know if you want to hear more.

As always, I'm rooting for you and here to help get you started in the right direction. •