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Responsiveness to Clients: The Ultimate Marketing Tip for Lawyers

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Special to the Legal

Don't you love it when someone responds to your text or email right away. How about returns your call within two hours?

Well now there is empirical and anecdotal evidence that one of the top things you can do to keep clients happy and expand their business is to be extremely responsive.

In-house counsel choosing external law firms say that responsiveness is the most important factor in their decision, according to a 2017 survey by Thomson Reuters. ABA research says 42% of the time, law firms take three days or more to respond to voicemails or forms filled out in their firm. Elena Kohn, associate divisional chief legal officer, AdventHealth, in a 2017 article on the ABA website stated that: "qualities as responsiveness and being concise are what I value the most. When I send out an email requesting an update, this is likely because my internal stakeholders need to know the status as soon as possible. Even a quick email acknowledging



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my concern and providing a quick update is a whole lot better than ignoring the request and then finally responding to it several days later. In the world of in-house counsel, several days is way too long." Kohn is in the majority when it comes to feeling this way about outside counsel responsiveness.

Anecdotally, several of my clients—lawyers in midsized (30-50 lawyer) firms who don't work for large corporations—recently told me that they were getting new clients simply because their competitors who had the business, were not responsive. These are the lawyers across the street losing their clients to you.

So what are these lawyers doing—or rather not doing?

They are not putting easy procedures in place to make sure they are meeting the client's expectation of responsiveness.

The most important thing to remember is that: responsiveness is defined by the client—not by you, their attorney. The client's opinion is all that matters.

Here are my suggestions to ensure you and your staff/team as responsive as possible:

Tip 1: At your first meeting with a client, discuss responsiveness. Make sure you understand how the client will define your responsiveness and accessibility. Ask specifically what they will be looking for. I have clients that pledge at this meeting to return all client communications within four hours. Only promise what you actually can and will do.

Tip 2: At your first meeting with a new client, discuss their communication preferences. What is the best way to respond to them—text, email, phone, overnight mail or pony express (caught you!)? Once you have asked, make sure everyone touching the client is aware of their preferences. Also, introduce

the client via Zoom or in person, to everyone on your staff who is part of your client service team.

Tip 3: Have a team meeting to discuss what the client has said and wants.

Tip 4: Put a simple plan in place to get back to the client in the way you have agreed upon. Make sure everyone on the client's team knows about it. You may need to make changes to things like how many rings your phone takes before going into voicemail (some lawyers have it set to 10 rings!). Give them examples of how to respond to a client in some positive way on your behalf. Rehearse this. Speak to the receptionist and describe who your client is and give instructions on what to do if they call or visit.

Tip 5: If your client sends you a matter but you are on a deadline for another client, do three things at the very least: first, respond to the client and let them know you are eager to handle the matter and second, give them a realistic and honest projection as to when they will see some action on it. Third, ask is it an emergency, so you can properly understand their exact needs now and get them help fast.

Tip 6: Regularly ask the client, "how am I doing?" and "how is my team doing?" Get feedback. Check in to see if they are satisfied with your level of responsiveness and communication. Ask if you are being too responsive and sending too many emails or texts.

Tip 7: Secret shop yourself to make sure "the machine" is working in the way you have told your

client it would be. I have "secret shopped" many lawyers, at their request, to see how fast their time was in responding to inquiries from prospective and current clients. It is astonishing to me how many of my inquiries went into a dark hole. Either my call or email was never returned or a staff member—who had no idea why they were calling me, feebly and inefficiently "checked in" with me. I could hear the fear in his voice.

Even a quick email acknowledging my concern and providing a quick update is a whole lot better than ignoring the request and then finally responding to it several days later.

One of my favorite examples of a law firm that has put its money where its mouth is for years—is Chicago employment law firm Lanier Muchin. For at least a decade, the firm's website has carried a two-hour pledge: "At Lanier Muchin, we're the nation's only law firm that returns clients' phone calls and emails within two hours or less. No exceptions. In the 70 years we've been in business, it's how we've always done it. We didn't set that standard because it's easy—it isn't. We do it because it's important to our clients. Which makes it important to us. So that's it. Two Hours. Faster, if you need us. Contact us anytime with

a problem that requires immediate attention, and we'll be there for you. No voicemail purgatory."

The firm offers a challenge: "Call your current law firm and call one of our lawyers. If our lawyer does not return your call before your lawyer, we will buy you lunch and donate \$100 to your favorite charity." My understanding is that to date—they have not lost the challenge.

You too can be the lawyer that sets the standard for responsive to clients, referral sources and potential clients and in the words of Bonnie Raitt, or close to, "gives them something to talk about."

Put these very simple but critical ideas to work for your practice. I'm happy to brainstorm with you. Responsiveness is key to growing your business and increasing profits. This is serious bottom line stuff!

Email me at stacy@stacyclarkmarketing.com on other business development topics/tips you want me to cover in future columns. •