

ADMINISTRATORS CAN IMPROVE CLIENT RELATIONS

by Sally J. Schmidt

Now that there's a buyer's market for legal services, two things are happening: clients are being more vocal about their relationships with their outside counsel, and law firms are seeking client feedback more actively. As a result, many firms are becoming aware of areas of client dissatisfaction. Almost inevitably, client complaints or concerns revolve around four primary areas:

- A feeling that the law firm does not appreciate the client's business or industry.
- A perception that the lawyers don't know enough about the client's business or industry.
- A desire to play a more active role in the representation, working virtually as a partner with the law firm.
- A sense that the firm did not provide enough "value" for the fees paid.

Law firm administrators can undertake numerous activities to overcome or prevent these common areas of dissatisfaction for clients. Some suggestions are outlined below.

Conduct client relations training

Both the lawyers and members of the staff benefit from training on how to build and nurture client relationships, including telephone skills, responsiveness, and communications. The training can be done through in-house newsletters, memoranda, meetings, and workshops, booklets, or videotapes. The Wisconsin Bar Association, for example, produces videotapes for support staff on telephone skills.

Get everyone involved in improving client service

It is important to make everyone responsible for improving client service. You can install suggestion boxes or initiate

a client service improvement contest. You can give out a "Client Service Award"

or form an attorney-staff task force to make recommendations. Most firms are amazed at the good ideas generated by the people on the "front lines."

Invest in your telephone system

The telephone is the single most important method of access for clients. Yet many firms make decisions about telephone systems, voice mail capabilities, and message centers without any input from or regard for clients. In addition, the lawyers should be encouraged to make themselves accessible to clients through car phones, cellular phones, and their home phones.

Design your space to be client-friendly

If you have the opportunity to design or redesign space, do so with the client in mind. The result could be anything from convenient coffee and soda stations to private client work and telephone areas. Even your client parking should be a consideration.

Make your firm easy to do business with

Take an inventory of your primary points of client contact. For example, how many times does the telephone ring before it's answered? How easy is it for clients to find their way to or through your firm (*i.e.*, the signage)? Can we put our documents in their software formats, or transmit them through e-mail or modems? Most importantly, evaluate the responsiveness and friendliness of the billing department—an area clients tend to contact with concerns or complaints. If you are able to handle client complaints quickly and effectively, client loyalty will increase.

Show your appreciation for clients' business

Analyze your client base and determine who your key clients are, or have been for several years, and then work with the lawyers to develop appropriate recog-

nitiation strategies. These could include special parties or receptions, a boat ride, a plaque, or a thank-you letter. Whatever the form, it is critical to thank clients for their business.

Implement a client feedback program

If your firm does not have a systematic effort in place to seek and respond to client feedback, it is making a dire mistake. Your existing clients are the firm's greatest asset in terms of new business they provide and referrals they make on your behalf; it is crucial to your ongoing success to make certain they are satisfied. The form the survey should take depends on the nature of your client relationships and your objectives for the research; but you can consider written questionnaires, telephone surveys, personal visits, or focus groups.

Interestingly, law firms that keep 98 percent of their clients from year to year are twice as profitable as those which keep a still impressive 94 percent each year. Client retention has a direct impact on your firm's bottom line. Administrators would be wise to look for ways to contribute directly to the retention and satisfaction of existing clients.

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