

Getting Clients "Invested" in Your Firm

SALLY J. SCHMIDT

A client relationship can be a fragile thing. Company mergers and acquisitions usually result in the loss of clients or a change in client decision makers. Of course, client consolidation, "partnering" or "convergence" with respect to legal relationships can mean opportunities for the *winning* law firms—but, as cynics might note, at a cost, such as price concessions or gratis "added value" services.

Before you complain about waning client loyalties, think about your own efforts toward clients. What is your firm doing to make clients feel "invested in"—and, as a result, loyal to—*your* firm? And what are your lawyers doing to invest in their client relationships?

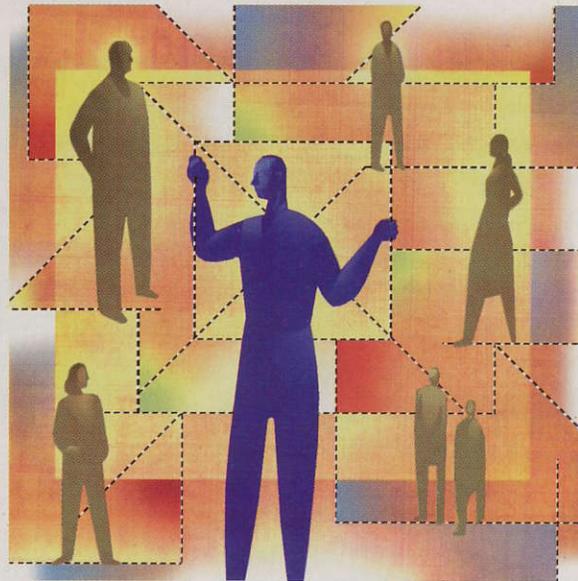
I have outlined below some ways to keep clients close to your firm.

"Voice of the Client" Programs

One of the most important ways to bind clients to a law firm is to make sure their input is solicited and heard. You can seek their feedback on perceptions of your law firm, ways their relationships can be improved—even thoughts for your strategic planning. For example:



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- **Personal interviews.** If your objective is to enhance a client relationship, the best way is through a qualitative process like a personal interview. Set up special meetings with clients to discuss their relationships with the lawyers and give your firm a report card. This is also a good time to talk about future issues or projects in which your firm might be involved.
- **Planning meetings.** Ask clients to participate, whether for your firm as a whole or for particular practice groups or industry areas. Invite their comments about trends, competitors, future needs and other issues that will help you position your firm for future success.
- **Focus groups.** If your firm is considering a specific issue or idea such as

Client relationships are more precious and precarious than ever. What is your firm doing to make clients feel "invested in"—and loyal to your firm? And what are you doing to invest in client relationships?

an extranet, new technology, a seminar series or an advertising program, ask some clients to weigh in before launching it. Designate a focus group of 6–10 clients or friends of the firm. Get their thoughts and suggestions to improve your final offering and minimize your risks.

- **Client board.** Ask a few of your most important clients to serve on an advisory board or “kitchen cabinet” for the management of the firm. Convene the group twice a year or once a quarter to have dinner while you kick around ideas and get suggestions for the firm.

Client Involvement in Firm Activities

There are many firm activities in which clients can participate. These will lend credibility to your efforts and will interest clients in your success. Many of these activities also allow you to showcase your relationships with clients and give you valuable time to work together “off the clock.” Consider:

- **Seminars.** You can invite clients to cochair firm seminars or serve as presenters at firm workshops or symposia. (Participation in activities like these makes the client look good, too!)
- **Newsletters.** If your firm publishes newsletters, ask clients to serve on editorial boards and perhaps submit articles. Once again, this helps clients with their own professional development while building your relationships.
- **Retreats or meetings.** Whether you meet as a firm or in practice groups, you easily can expand your

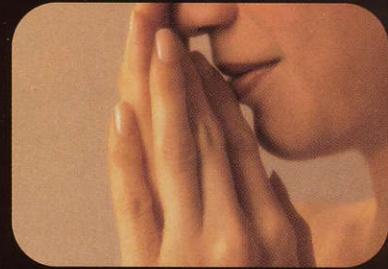
activity to include clients. Ask them to make presentations on their businesses, legal needs and future plans. Invite them to serve on panels discussing issues related to legal relationships. Involve them in sub-

stantive discussions. Or just have them attend social events.

- **Training.** You can develop joint training programs with important clients (e.g., a CLE program with the

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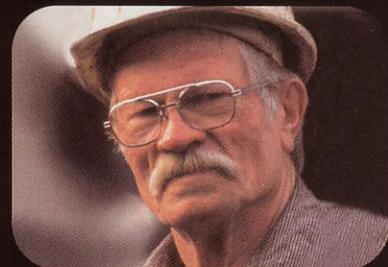
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legal department of a financial services company) or invite clients to attend in-house training programs your firm already is conducting.

Involvement in Client Activities

Finally, your lawyers should look for ways to involve themselves in their

clients' activities whenever possible and appropriate. Examples:

- **Training.** If a client has an in-house training program, it may be worthwhile to send the associates who are newly assigned to work on the client's matters for a quick orientation.

- **"Loaning" attorneys.** Another excellent idea is to have your lawyers work onsite for a client. This help might be scheduled regularly (e.g., two days a week) or in a crunch, such as particularly busy times or when a staff member goes on leave.

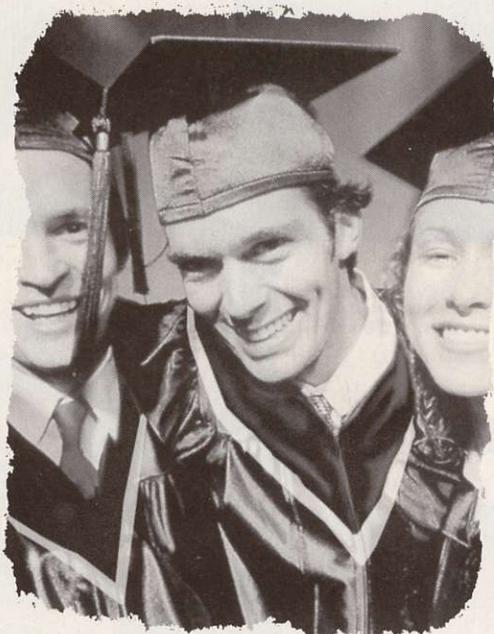
- **Client planning meetings.** Lawyers should ask whether it is appropriate for them to sit in on planning meetings for key clients, to better understand the clients' goals and objectives and be able to anticipate issues.

- **Tours.** At a minimum, firm personnel should visit clients to see the facilities, meet key personnel and learn about the clients' products, services or methods of operation.

- **Celebrations.** In particular, lawyers should note special client events by attending open houses when clients build new offices, tracking anniversaries of companies' formations, and even recognizing personal events such as weddings and births.

As a result of myriad changes affecting the legal industry, client relationships are more precious and precarious than ever. Law firms must make special efforts to let clients know their suggestions, relationships and business are appreciated. Get your clients invested in your firm! ■

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- **Connecting With Your Client: Success Through Improved Client Communications Techniques.** Noelle C. Nelson, Ph.D. ABA Law Practice Management Section. 1996.
- **"Adding Value: What Does That Mean to Clients?"** Sally Schmidt. Schmidt Marketing memorandum (www.schmidt-marketing.com). Summer 1998.
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