

Play to Win

Dealing With an Upset Client

By [Sally J. Schmidt](#) | Jun.22.17 | [Business Development](#), [Client Relations](#), [Client Service](#), [Daily Dispatch](#), [Relationships](#)

It's almost a certainty that, at some point, every lawyer will have an unhappy client. In his seminal research on loyalty, business strategist Frederick Reichheld concluded that simply satisfying clients is not enough to retain them. Research showed that depending on the industry, between 65 and 85 percent of customers or clients who defected said they were *satisfied* or *very satisfied* with the company they abandoned.

They left because they didn't like the experience.

This is perfectly demonstrated by a client feedback interview I conducted a few years back. My client, the law firm, had delivered a major victory for its client — much greater than anyone expected. Yet that client no longer sent business to the firm. Why? According to the in-house lawyer, "I didn't like working with them. They were arrogant and non-collaborative."

I was recently reminded of the proper (or, should I say, improper) way of handling an upset client after I waited 25 minutes past my scheduled haircut appointment time. In my situation, getting a decent haircut wasn't going to be enough to make me happy with the stylist; the experience was negative. The same holds true for your clients. Maybe they're angry that you didn't call back. Maybe they're annoyed that they had to wait for 15 minutes in the lobby. Maybe they're disappointed that their bill was twice what they expected.

Whatever the situation, here are some thoughts on how both of you can get through the issue with your relationship intact.

Steps for Diffusing the Situation

Depending on the issue, clients' reactions could range from mild displeasure to outright anger. Try these tips for dealing with someone who is upset.

Don't get defensive. Stay calm and let clients vent a bit about the problem. Hopefully, they will not be rude or abusive — that's another issue — but it's best if they can let off a little steam. Nod your head. Make good eye contact. Don't cross your arms. Paraphrase or confirm what they've said.

Apologize. The first words out of your mouth should be some form of "I'm sorry." If you are in the wrong, say "I'm sorry." However, even if you didn't do anything wrong per se, you can still be sorry that the client is upset. "I'm sorry you had that experience" or "I'm sorry you are disappointed with our services" are versions that may be appropriate. By the way, "I take responsibility" or "Thank you for telling me" are not equivalent to "I'm sorry."

Drill down to identify the real issue. For me, it was a lack of communication: No one at the stylist's bothered to fill me in on the delay. Ask questions and be an active listener to get to the root of the problem. Did that large bill make them look bad to their superiors? Would they have appreciated a heads-up about the deposition being canceled?

Jointly problem-solve to identify a reasonable solution. What does the client hope will happen next? Be open to ideas for resolving the complaint. If clients are dissatisfied with your responsiveness, will you promise a certain turnaround time on calls or emails? If clients are unhappy with your ongoing communications, will you develop a more formal status reporting mechanism?

Don't promise what you can't deliver. If you are not the billing partner, for example, you might not be able to agree to reduce the invoice without approval. However, you can tell the client your next step is to inquire what can be done.

Follow up. Be dogged in making sure whatever is promised gets delivered, and as quickly as possible. The speed with which you deal with a problem makes a difference in how clients perceive your dedication to them. If the ball is in someone else's court, make sure they do what they are supposed to do. And then follow up with clients to thank them for bringing the issue to your attention and to ensure they are satisfied with the solution.

While it may not feel like it, a client who complains is a good thing. It not only gives you a chance to fix the issue, it can actually build loyalty by demonstrating your commitment. How you handle the problem can be a defining moment in your client relationship.

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