

Play to Win

How Effective Communicators Help Clients Understand

By [Sally J. Schmidt](#) | Oct.06.16 | [Communicating](#), [Daily Dispatch](#), [Legal Marketing](#), [Play to Win](#)



I read an article recently called “[Marketing Yourself as an Expert: What Clients Look For.](#)” According to the research presented, there are five key factors that clients associate with “visible experts”:

- They come highly recommended by friends and colleagues (this was mentioned by 57 percent of the respondents)
- They’re effective communicators with the ability to make complicated subjects easily understandable (38 percent)
- They’re problem solvers with a proven track record of success that’s highly visible (36 percent)
- They inspire confidence when they speak (31 percent)
- They’re published in prestigious publications (27 percent)

The factor that interests me the most is the second — the ability to make complicated subjects easily understandable. If law isn’t a complicated subject, I don’t know what is. I am always impressed when lawyers find ways to simplify issues or processes, whether for client service or marketing purposes.

Simplifying Messages

Lawyers can help clients better understand information by paying attention to the way the messages are presented. Lawyer content tends to be overly complex and dense. Here are some ways to improve that.

Be practical. Whether you are giving a speech, writing an article or sending an email message, boil down the issues to key takeaways. Summarize what the reader or listener needs to know, such as “The Top 10 Things You Should Do” or “Three Steps You Should Take.”

Write in plain English. I frequently see headlines on law firm legal alerts that make me scratch my head. If you worked in the health-care industry, which article would you be more interested in reading?

- “Considerations for Hospitals to Reduce Liability and the Costs of Drug Theft” or
- “Are Your Employees Stealing Drugs?”

Tell stories. If you are a real estate lawyer, don't just tick off your specialty areas like condemnation, eminent domain and development. Instead, give examples of what you have done. Create a list of representative matters that illustrate issues involved in, and the ultimate resolutions of, various matters. Write up case studies that illustrate how clients were helped.

Using Visuals

According to the Social Science Research Network, 65 percent of people are visual learners. You've heard that a picture is worth 1,000 words. Well, it's true. Employing tools that reduce content to a visual form will help clients better understand information. Here are some ways graphics can help.

Simplify process. If your area of practice involves steps, put them into a chart. An environmental lawyer could put the process of getting regulatory approval into a [Gantt chart](#). An estate planning lawyer could create a flowchart or road map of what happens given various scenarios — if this, then that.

Make complex content less intimidating. Graphics are great for numbers or aggregations of data. For instance, you could use an infographic to present your expertise in mergers and acquisitions, including the number of deals you've handled, the industries of clients, states or countries in which you've worked, aggregate deal value, etc.

Summarize. Get rid of extraneous words and simply present content. An employment lawyer could create a chart summarizing a 50-state survey of how vacation pay differs from state to state, for example.

Making content understandable is important whether you are using it for marketing (e.g., articles and speeches), business development (e.g., pitches and proposals) or serving your clients (e.g., client meetings and retainer letters). And don't assume this approach is only appropriate for unsophisticated consumers of legal services; even in-house lawyers appreciate when information is easily understood.

To make sure clients are hearing what you are saying, try to keep these four things in mind: reduce the number of words, use visuals, summarize and speak in plain English.

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