

GETTING TO KNOW YOU/By Sally Schmidt

# Pave the Way for Better Client Relations

Clients want lawyers who will help them meet their business objectives. To do this, attorneys must get to know the client and the client's business — and ask questions.

**C**LIENTS HAVE much to say about legal services — both good and bad. Unfortunately, many lawyers never bother to ask.

Time and time again, clients have said the quality of the legal work is not the only criterion used to evaluate a lawyer's performance. The factors related to the delivery of the service — such as communication, interpersonal skills, interest and rapport — are equally, and sometimes even more, important. In fact, many professional liability claims are a result of poor communications or misunderstandings.

Whether you are an individual practitioner or a member of a large firm, a senior partner or a first-year associate, client relationships are your responsibility. One of the basic tenets of marketing is that your efforts should begin with existing clients. It's more effective and less expensive to maintain existing clients than to develop new ones. The goal is not to get clients; it is to have clients. And one way to keep the clients you have is by practicing good client relations.

A major client (car dealer) called his primary contact at a law firm for some advice. The client was thinking about buying another dealership and asked his lawyer what he thought. The lawyer responded that he would get back to the client with a response, and did — one week and \$1,000 of research later. The client was outraged. He had decided the very next day not to pursue the deal. "When I asked you what you thought," he said, "I was expecting your gut business reaction."

Clients want lawyers who will help them meet their business objectives. In order to do this, the lawyer must get to know the client and the client's business, and ask probing questions to spot the real issues or problems.

## Helpful Hints

Here are some tips on how you can get to know your clients better:

- Take time to learn the client's business. This will demonstrate your interest in the company's well-being. Read annual reports and other company information.
- Tour the client's facility and get to know all the company's key people or managers.
- Become familiar with the company's jargon. Learn about its products and operations.
- Volunteer to spend a day at the client's place of business to learn more about it.

- Show an active and genuine interest in the client's industry. Attend meetings of related trade or industry groups.

- The most important thing you can do for clients is try to understand their businesses and problems. The way to do this is by being a good listener. Try to look beyond the "assignment" and learn how it fits into the client's overall objectives.

- Be a business adviser to clients. Present them with alternatives, and then try to give your opinion of which is the most appropriate solution. Clients want counsel and advice.

- Be creative and anticipate needs. Try to look for ways and areas in which to help clients, even if they haven't asked. For example, if an excessive number of employees are calling the law firm with concerns, offer to set up a better or more economical communication system.

- Help clients look good. Make sure you understand the client's own personal agenda.

- Don't forget the bottom line. Clients expect their lawyers to make recommendations that make economic sense.

- If you learn that a client is planning to hire an in-house lawyer, that is a perfect opportunity to help the client and preserve your interests. Volunteer to help with the hiring.

- Don't be afraid to tell clients something they don't want to hear. If you are speaking in their best interest, they will appreciate it.

- Refer clients to other business advisers who can help them, such as accountants, engineers, brokers, or bankers.

- Highlight your value. The better business adviser you are, the more valuable you become to clients.

- Set up in-house workshops at the client's site to address concerns or help train client employees.

*This article is part of "What Clients Say: A Lawyer's Guide to Better Client Relations," written and produced by Sally Schmidt of Sally Schmidt Consulting. This 32-page booklet is based on interviews with dozens of law firm clients, and includes practical tips and suggestions to help lawyers be better at client relations.*

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