

The Client

It probably is a safe bet that everyone at one time or another has been the recipient of poor service: the garage mechanic who doesn't complete the repairs by the agreed upon hour; the waitress who never returns to check on the meal; the department store clerk who disappears just as the customer approaches the counter. What many lawyers fail to realize is that much of the general population is telling similar, sordid tales about them: "He doesn't return my phone calls." "She talks down to me." "The only time I ever hear from them is when I get a bill."

Client or customer service has emerged as the business theme for the 1990s. At some point recently, virtually every marketing or business publication has stressed the same important fact: We are living in a service economy and the ability of a company or firm to provide quality service will be a factor—perhaps the most critical factor—in achieving and sustaining a competitive advantage.

Quality service is not limited to good work, as David Maister points out in his excellent article in *The American Lawyer*, "Quality Work Doesn't Mean Quality Service." The technical component of the legal assignment (the quality of the *work*) is always accompanied by a host of *service* indicators, such as responsiveness, timeliness, accessibility and

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even the prompt return of telephone calls. Clients use a combination of these factors to judge the quality of the legal service rendered—technical work and relationship skills.

A recent study of physicians and their patients by *Marketing News* reported there was a significant gap between how the physician defined quality care and how it was perceived and evaluated by the patient. The authors, who generalized their findings to other professional services, concluded that most professional service providers do not understand the characteristics and qualities which clients/customers/patients use in evaluating the quality of services, and that things such as the attitude of the receptionist or the appearance of the lobby are important.

by Sally J. Schmidt

Service Edge

