By Sally J. Schmidt

Turning Lemons into Lemonade

No lawyer wants to disappoint a client, but unfortunately it does happen from time to time. Clients may be upset about the way their matter turned out—a negotiation that broke down or a lawsuit that went the other side's way. They may be angry about service-related issues, from a bill that is larger than expected to a missed deadline or an unreturned phone call. They may be experiencing a personality clash with their lawyer. In the worst case, the client may fire—or stop using—the law firm for the perceived or real offense.

Yet as unpleasant as these situations are, it's important to see client complaints as opportunities. Studies show that most clients don't complain at all. They may feel their comments wouldn't make a difference; they may not know how to register a complaint; they may want to avoid a confrontation with the lawyer, or may worry about disrupting their relationship.

Left unaddressed or unresolved, incidents such as these are certain to take their toll on your client relationships. Conversely, with proper management you may be able to use the problem to build an even better relationship with your client. Even if the issue remains unresolved, proactive efforts will often stem bad-mouthing or festering ill will resulting from no response.

Preparing to Approach the Client

You may learn about a problem with a client from the client directly, from a colleague working with the client, or from a third party (such as another advisor). At the first hint of a problem, you should prepare to talk to the client. Depending on the situation, you may want to:

- Speak to other lawyers or paralegals who work with the client, to see if they know any more about the issue;
- Speak with close contacts or confidantes within the client organization, to get a full appraisal of the problem;
- Review the files on the client's matters to apprise yourself of the recent relationship;
- Determine who in the firm should be involved in meeting with the client (*i.e.*, who has the best relationship);
- Get ready to address specifics, such as acknowledging areas where you or the firm fell short of the client's expectations, or presenting steps you intend to take to rectify the problem or to avoid a recurrence of the situation;
- Set up a meeting with the client to address the issue (held at the client's convenience at no charge, of course).

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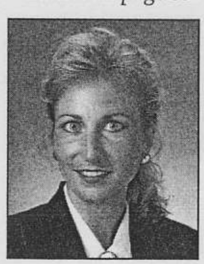

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