



Play to Win

Client Empathy: How Wearing Their Shoes Builds a Better Practices

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I heard a lawyer tell a joke once that went something like this: "If you're having trouble with a client, walk a mile in his shoes. That way, you will have a one-mile head start and he won't have any shoes." It's a funny line, but in reality, true client empathy is often the one thing standing between a stagnant practice and a thriving one.

I know there are times when that kind of attitude can be tempting. Clients can be challenging, demanding and frustrating. It can be easy to dismiss their complaints — and easier yet to stay in your comfort zone doing business as usual.

But when you think about your own experiences as a client or customer, it becomes easier to empathize with a client's situation.

For most people, hiring a lawyer means anxiety, uncertainty and, no less important, costs. Most clients have come to you via a referral or a vetting process. They think you know what you are doing and trust that you will not be making mistakes on their legal documents or in the legal process. So what they are paying attention to are other things — and small things make big impressions.

Lawyer Client Empathy: Wearing Their Shoes

As a business owner, I've had a lot of experiences as a client or customer. Let me share a few examples to make the point:

- **I send an email with a question ... and nothing happens.** Did you receive it? Are you rounding up the information? Are you on vacation? Inquiries should be acknowledged immediately. You may not have the answer but you certainly can let me know you received the question and when I might expect a response.
- **You send an email asking for information ... that I sent to you previously.** I'm busy, too; I don't have time to send you what you need more than once. Plus I start to wonder about your organizational skills. Are you missing other information? Are you missing deadlines?
- **I call ... and your voicemail box is full.** Wow. Not only can I not leave my message, I'm thinking you are terrible at using even 20th-century technology or terrible at returning calls or terrible at managing your practice — none of which is good.
- **I sit down with you ... and you review my file in front of me to bring yourself up to date.** I understand you may not remember everything we discussed before, but we had an appointment. If you had taken good notes and five to 10 minutes to look them over before I arrived, you would sound confident — and build my confidence in you.
- **I get a bill ... and it doesn't represent the amount to which we agreed.** Did you forget? Did you do more work than expected? If it's the latter, you need to tell me before sending the invoice. If it's the former, now I'm suspicious.
- **You send me an email in the afternoon to set up a meeting ... the following morning.** I have a busy schedule; my time is valuable, like yours. Now I have the impression that you're just trying to fit me in.

Remember:

- Even the best clients are there because they have a problem or issue that needs to be solved.
- Client-centered lawyering means explaining things in plain English, no matter how sophisticated the client is.
- Even the most satisfied clients aren't thrilled to be spending money on lawyers.

The Service You Provide Is Every Bit as Important as the Services You Provide

So take some time to reflect on your own experiences as a buyer — both good and bad. What was it about the best providers that made you feel that way? What actions brought you disappointment that you want to avoid? Empathy will make you a much better — and more successful — lawyer.

Sally Schmidt, President of Schmidt Marketing, Inc., helps lawyers and law firms grow their practices. She was a founder and the first President of the Legal Marketing Association, is a Fellow of the College of Law Practice Management and was one of the first inductees to LMA's Hall of Fame. Known for her practical advice, she is the author of two books, "[Marketing the Law Firm: Business Development Techniques](#)" and "[Business Development for Lawyers: Strategies for Getting and Keeping Clients](#)." Follow her @SallySchmidt.