

play to win

Earning a Client's Trust: What It Takes

By [Sally J. Schmidt](#)

I conduct a lot of client surveys and am happy to report that most clients are quite satisfied with their law firms. The topics clients attribute to a positive evaluation most frequently include responsiveness, accessibility, expertise, results and cost-consciousness or efficiency (i.e., providing value).

But there is one factor that is usually raised by only the most loyal and long-standing clients: trust. And, when it is raised, it is often *the* most important criterion for the client.

What Clients Say

Here are some representative quotes from recent client interviews on the subject:

- “A lot of firms would love to get some of our business. We go where the expertise is and where we have implicit trust. If [lawyer] told me anything, I’d take it to the bank.”
- “The level of care all the way through the organization is exactly what it should be. They are a trusted partner of ours.”
- “I’ve trusted [lawyer] so much, I sent my family members to him. That’s how much I trust him.”
- “I’ve known [lawyer] for a very long time. I have the utmost trust and respect in him and his opinions.”
- “I trust him to do what’s in my best interest.”

If you can earn a client’s trust, you will turn a happy client into a lifelong client.

Earning Trust

What does it take to earn a client’s trust? Here are a couple of illustrative actions:

- Tell clients they are better off not pursuing a legal matter. Clients recount examples like a matter that would cost \$150,000 to recover \$175,000. As one explained, “[Lawyer] said to me, ‘We can do that but do we really want to? In the end, the only people who will make money are me and the other attorney.’”
- Tell clients things they don’t necessarily want to hear. Clients appreciate when a lawyer is honest about the situation and gives an objective view. Said one, “We have a high level of trust that they will act in our best interest. A lot of times that means being upfront — not always telling you what you want to hear but telling you what you need to hear.”

Other ways to earn a client’s trust include:

- Telling the client that you or your firm can’t handle something and offering to help them find another resource or professional.
- Owning up to your mistakes (e.g., overruns or unnecessary work).
- Rigorously keeping the client’s confidences.
- Praising the work of another law firm.
- Advising clients proactively of things they could be doing more efficiently in-house.

A client’s trust needs to be earned. Once you do that, the result will not just be a happy client, it will be a client for life.