

Exceptional Client Service In Law Firms

Developing Your Client Service Improvement Plan

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Nothing is more important to your firm's future than exceptional client service. An effective client service improvement program is one of the most important marketing initiatives that a firm can undertake. National studies demonstrate that approximately 70% of clients who stop using a particular attorney do so because they feel they were treated poorly or indifferently and 30% changed attorneys because their previous attorneys weren't available. Clearly, from what law firms' clients are telling us in our telephone interviews with them – attorneys and law firms need to improve client service by integrating a client-first service focus into everyday practice.

Frequently when we mention action plans and implementation to a group of attorneys we get the following reactions and responses:

- § Lets create a committee and study the matter further
- § We need more time
- § We don't have enough data or information
- § We have always done things this way and we don't want to change
- § We don't have time to do it
- § We are already busy – we don't need any more business – everything is fine the way it is

Moving from debate to action plan-

ning and implementation is difficult for attorneys. However, unless a firm can move from debate and ideas to actual accountability and implementation it will remain anchored in the past in a field of dreams, obsolete practices, and unhappy clients.

Here is a road map to help you get started.

Assemble The Team

Now that you have completed your client research and reviewed the research report, you are ready to move forward. The first critical step is to assemble the team of key players who will be responsible for developing the plan and seeing it implemented throughout the firm. The team should include the managing partner, administrator or office manager, practice area heads, accounting manager, and other key firm members. Keep the team as small as possible. Consistency is critical. The team should meet two or three times to brainstorm and knock out the plan – and then for one to two hours every four to six weeks to monitor the actual implementation.

Identify And Write Firm Mission Statement And Client Service Goals

A mission statement is a one to four

paragraph statement that stresses the importance of exceptional service and spells out your firm's basic commitments. It can include:

- § A definition of what business you are in.
- § What clients you serve.
- § What principles or beliefs you are pledging to adhere to with regard to your clients and employees.

Begin by reviewing and brainstorming client and employee feedback and comments from the satisfaction surveys. Identify basic values and themes and then turn into statements that expresses the firm's commitment to quality service.

Brainstorm Solutions You Can And Are Willing To Implement

Use feedback from your surveys to identify problem areas and opportunities expressed by clients and employees. Observe and review internal processes and the impact they have upon client service. Put yourself in your client's shoes and think like a client or customer. Develop a list of areas that you can and will improve, who will be responsible for completion, and timeliness for completion.

Put Together The Plan

Having conducted client and employee surveys, written your

mission statement and identified areas that you can and will improve, you now have the information and foundation you need to spell out an effective client service improvement plan. There are six critical areas which must be included in your plan:

- § Top-down commitment
- § Service standards
- § Improving processes
- § Training
- § Rewards and recognition
- § Ongoing feedback

Without commitment from at least a core group of your senior partners your program is doomed. They must not give lip service – they must walk the talk and set the example of what client service behaviors the firm expects.

Service standards should be developed and incorporated into the plan. Examples include:

- § Smile at clients as they approach you.
- § Answer the phone within three rings.
- § Return all client calls within 24 hours.
- § Always apologize if a client is upset.
- § Express empathy to the client.
- § Dress appropriately for work by wearing clothing outlined in the firm policy manual.
- § Handle client business in an efficient and professional manner.
- § Treat the client as the most important part of your job.
- § Under promise and over-deliver.
- § Be on time.
- § Follow-up on your promises.
- § Go out of your way to make it easy for a client to do business with you and the firm.
- § Resolve client complaints promptly and efficiently.
- § Suggest and recommend ideas to firm management that will improve client service.

Over time many firm processes, procedures, and ways of doing things become obsolete and no longer make sense. Often they are “client irritants” and frustrate clients and make it difficult for them to conduct business with your firm. Be on the lookout for “client irritants” and ways of doing things different. For example, if you really care about client service should you consider evening or weekend hours? What about arrogance and attitude? Process improvement should be ongoing. All employees should be encouraged to constantly think of ways that process can be improved and bring such ideas to the attention of firm management.

Countless research studies show that people learn faster and take more initiative when they are given positive reinforcement for doing a job well than when they are given negative feedback for doing something badly. **What gets rewarded is what gets done.**

Improving client service is all about employees developing new behavioral habits. It takes about 30 days to develop a new habit. Before new behaviors can become habits they must be practiced, reinforced and rewarded. An effective reward and recognition program is critical to the success of the client service improvement program. You must include a strategy for rewarding service excellence if you want it to become part of your firm’s culture. Several of our clients have implemented client service employee of the quarter programs. Feedback collected from ongoing client surveys and recommendation of supervisors serves as the basis of selection. The employee of the quarter gets a day off with pay that can be taken in conjunction with a weekend. Some firms are providing paid trips for employee and family to

resorts, gift certificates to top-notch restaurants, and certificates of appreciation. Client service is being incorporated into performance reviews as well.

Training should also be a key component of your plan. You must give the employees the tools to get the job done. Client service improvements will not be realized unless you put in place a comprehensive and well-executed training program. A training program not only enhances the service you clients receive but also benefits your firm by:

- § Increasing teamwork
- § Improving the client service skills of attorneys and staff
- § Helping your attorneys and staff understand their role in making service shine

A comprehensive training program includes different types of workshops on a variety of subjects. Training typically involves:

- § Awareness building
- § Client service skills
- § Internal client service
- § Team building
- § Problem solving
- § Communications
- § Service management

Some method for gathering ongoing client and employee feedback must also be incorporated into the service improvement plan. Without a system for regularly measuring your service effectiveness, you have no way of knowing if you are improving or not. Typically some form of survey system is typically used and is either conducted in house or outsourced to an outside firm.

Implementation Of The Plan

The plan should be designed to foster accountability and implementation. As soon as possible a letter should be sent to your entire client base thank-

ing them for participating in your satisfaction survey and outlining the changes that the firm is putting in place. If problems were indicated by specific clients those problems should be resolved immediately with the client. Program launch meetings should be held with all employees and they should be provided with copies of the plan. The importance of exceptional client service should be stressed and the change program for changing the firm to a “client first” culture should be outlined.

Client service change programs take time so be patient. New skills must be learned and new habits developed. This takes time. Typically, a firm can expect to implement an entire service program within one year and see positive results within the first six months.

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The firm helps law firms implement client service improvement programs consisting of client satisfaction surveys, program development, and training and coaching programs. Their coaching program provides attorneys and staff with one-on-one coaching to help them get “unstuck” and move forward, reinventing both themselves and their law practice.

Founded in 1984, Olmstead & Associates serves clients across the United States ranging in size from 100 professionals to firms with solo practitioners. Dr. Olmstead is the Editor-in-Chief of “The Lawyers Competitive Edge: The Journal of Law Office Economics and Management,” published by West Group. He also serves as a member of the Legal Marketing Association (LMA) Research Committee. Dr. Olmstead may be contacted via e-mail at jolmstead@olmsteadassoc.com. Additional articles and information is available at the firm’s web site: www.olmsteadassoc.com

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