

Exceptional Client Service In Law Firms

Tips On Creating A Client Focused Culture

By John W. Olmstead, MBA, Ph.D, CMC

Lawyers and law firms are in the business of selling services. Their product is their intellectual capital, which is the professional talent, skills and capabilities of the entire service team – lawyers and non-lawyers alike. Then why don't lawyers embrace client service and realize that exceptional client service may be the most effective way of differentiating themselves from other lawyers and maintaining a competitive advantage.

In our visits to law firm clients of all sizes across the country we typically observe the following:

§Everything from office hours, location, noontime availability and coverage, and general availability is designed to serve what is best for the firm and not for the client.

§Law firms are spending tons of money on advertising then failing to provide adequate client service training for receptionist and switchboard operators. The result – dropped calls, poor initial impression of the firm, lost opportunities as prospective clients are either lost or hang up in frustration.

§The receptionist position, if it exists at all, is filled with the cheapest person the firm can find. The receptionist, while serving on the front lines of client service and the initial point of contact, is typically considered the least valuable position in the firm.

§Lawyers are arrogant and act as if they are better than their clients and know what is best for them. They seem to think that the legal matter is their case rather than the client's case.

§Client service standards are nonexistent.

§Client surveys are not conducted and there is no client feedback system in place.

§Law firms are unwilling to make any investments in client service. Client service training is not provided for the receptionist, other staff members and attorneys in the firm.

§No one in the firm knows how to properly answer the phone or effectively listen to client problems.

§Clients and employees are treated rudely and not respected.

Delivering great client service is extremely important in today's legal marketplace. More and more lawyers and law firms are competing for fewer clients while client loyalty continues to drop. It is no longer sufficient to simply be competent or even expert in today's competitive legal environment – law firms must distinguish themselves by the service they provide. Lawyers and law firms must strive for 100% client satisfaction. **Service is how many clients can tell one lawyer or law firm from another.**

In a survey of 600 corporate counsels, 69.7% state that they have hired a new credible, major law firm in the past year and in 2003, only 26.5% said that their firm is the "best." When asked what client focus means to them, the following responses (ranked in order of importance) illustrate the client service gap.

§Understand My Company Needs	20.6%
§Understand My Business	20.6%
§Responsive	19.1%
§Communications	9.2%
§Anticipate Needs	8.4%
§Availability	6.1%
§Value Motivated	4.6%
§Best for Client	3.1%

Individual clients are advising of similar service gaps:

According to Jay Foonberg 67% of clients who stop using a particular lawyer do so because they feel they were treated poorly or indifferently and 27% changed lawyers because their previous lawyers weren't available.

Clearly, from what law firms' clients are telling us, lawyers and law firms need to improve client service by integrating a client-first service focus into everyday practice and getting feedback.

Most clients can't evaluate the quality of your legal work. What they can and do is evaluate the experience of working with you.

Lets face it – customer and client expectations have changed across all industries. It is a buyers market and they know it. Today clients want it all: **better-faster-cheaper.**

If you can't provide it they will go somewhere else.

Tips For Implementing A Client-Focused Culture In Your Firm

TIP #1: Realize that exceptional client service is the name of the game. Your law firm exists to serve clients. They pay your bills and if you don't perform they will take their business to another firm.

TIP #2: Make a commitment to providing exceptional client service. Not talk or slogans – but action-orientated client-first behavior that become part of the firm's culture, a habit and part of daily life exhibited by everyone in the firm. In other words, **walk the talk.** This commitment must come from top management, which must also demonstrate, by example that the firm is serious about providing excellent client service.

TIP #3: Determine where you presently stand in the eyes of your clients and how

they perceive you. Conduct a professional client satisfaction survey to solicit feedback and identify needed improvement areas. Insure that the mail survey or telephone survey is professionally done and that the results of the study are valid, reliable, and meaningful. A follow-up/problem resolution system must be part of the program.

TIP #4: Based upon feedback received from your clients and your own assessments design and implement a client service improvement program. The program should focus on long-term behavioral change and not just a one-shot quick fix. It should be established as a six to twelve month campaign designed to burn new client-first habits into the fabric of the firm's culture. The campaign should include:

§A client service improvement plan

§Client service standards

§A kickoff meeting (or series) for all employees sharing with them the results of the client satisfaction survey, the firm's dedication to exceptional client service, and client service improvement plan.

§An ongoing abbreviated random client satisfaction telephone interview program. (Permanent program)

§A series of client service training workshops for all attorneys and staff.

Incentives, bonuses, and special rewards for employees that have provided exceptional client service. (Permanent program)

§Linkage of customer satisfaction to employee performance evaluations.

(Permanent program)

§Incorporation of client-first in all internal and external communications.

§Design of internal scripts, graphic, and other support vehicles designed to remind employees of the firm's commitment to exceptional client service.

§Review of results and level of improvement in client satisfaction at the conclusion of the campaign.

TIP #5: Establish client service standards.

For example:

§Phone calls will be returned within 2 hours.

§Be client friendly. Treat clients like you would like to be treated. Eliminate arrogance in manner and tone.

§Answer phone calls by the third ring.

§Provide status updates monthly.

§Send out billing statements monthly.

§Send clients copies of all documents created or received on his or her behalf.

§Ask clients how you are doing.

§Smile – whether on the phone or in person.

§Ask a client their name and always use it.

§Thank clients for their business.

§Go out of your way to make it easy for clients to do business with the firm.

§Do what you promise and when you promised.

§Don't make promises you can't keep.

TIP #6: Ask attorneys and staff to put themselves in the client's shoes and think like a client.

TIP #7: Ask attorneys and staff to think about how they would like to be treated and service that they expect from others.

TIP #8: Ask attorneys and staff to make an inventory of positive common sense client service behaviors and have them practice these behaviors until they become common habits.

TIP #9: Give clients what they want. For example:

Help clients feel comfortable working with you and your staff.

Treat your clients with respect.

Be accessible to your clients.

Demonstrate that you understand your client's concerns and you are their ally.

Ongoing communication and information regarding the status of their matters.

TIP #10: Hire the best receptionist that you can afford. Invest in training. If you are a

small firm consider enriching her job by putting her in charge of client service and have her serve as marketing coordinator. Reward and pay your receptionist well.

TIP #11: It takes 30 days or longer to form new habits. **PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE.** Celebrate your successes, reward employees, and continually strive for improvement in client satisfaction. Your goal should be 100% client satisfaction.

Keep up the good work.

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