

7 Ways for Law Firms to Improve Client Service

Question: Do Law Firms Really Need to Please Clients All of the Time?



Answer: Of course not. Only work to please those clients you wish to keep.

Jaffe Staff

While client service has been a buzzword in the legal industry for well more than a decade, progress in the area has been slow to come. Many law firms now seek client feedback, either through a formal program of visits or surveys, or informally as attorneys interact with clients.

However, as a former CMO and current marketing consultant to the legal industry, I have had the opportunity to speak with numerous law firm clients, and in the last two years, I have seen an increase in the number of clients who say that exceptional service is what keeps them coming back to a particular law firm or lawyer.

So, perhaps it is not out of the realm of possibility for law firms to start to think like Ritz Carlton or Disney when it comes to a purposeful approach to the client experience. However, creating a culture in which exceptional client service is internally valued on par with quality legal work and billable time requires a shift in culture.

Reshifting Focus to Client Service

Lawyers are trained to practice law. While some lawyers also excel at business, it's often a skill acquired over time rather than one learned through formal education. Even for lawyers who do have formal business training, the nuanced aspects of client service are often secondary to other elements of running a business, such as finance or operations.

This means that lifting client service up on the ladder of priorities is a significant change for many firms. And change is never easy. Usually it is best undertaken incrementally.

To that end, here are seven ways law firms can start to place real, tangible value on providing excellent client service.

Involve Everyone, Not Just Staff

The words and actions of firm leadership must make it clear that everyone is a part of the client experience – attorneys and staff alike. Providing client service training for the staff while not requiring the same commitment from the attorneys will not impart sincerity to the effort. In fact, years of conducting feedback sessions with the clients of law firms have shown me that service issues raised rarely lie with staff. Because attorneys are the service providers in a law firm, quality client service should start with them.

Set Minimum Expectations

While it is not likely that attorneys will accept hard and fast guidelines on how to conduct their practices and interact with clients, it is reasonable to expect them to adhere to minimal requirements of client service. Firms already prep lawyers to meet minimum standards in areas such as timekeeping and billing, so the concept is not foreign. Through a meaningful and collaborative discussion, develop a few client service standards. This might include such basics as procedures to be followed when a client is left waiting in the reception area or how voicemail messages will be updated when attorneys are out of the office. Law firms can also incorporate client service guidelines into their firm handbooks, specifically with regards to professional conduct. After all, a law firm's brand is the sum of its personnel, and one bad apple really can spoil the bunch.

Empower Everyone

A Ritz-Carlton employee once told me that every employee has the authority to take action when they see a guest in need. Staff, such as receptionists and legal assistants, often are the individuals who most frequently interact with clients and observe how others interact with clients. Law firms should empower these employees by giving them the authority to make suggestions, even if anonymously, for improvements in client service. It should be made clear, too, that such suggestions will not lead to punishment, nor will reporting instances of substandard service. After all, law firm management cannot be everywhere at once, so it is critical to have some bottom-up processes in place to ensure the finer details of the firm's service standards are being addressed.

Reward the Behavior You Seek

Devoting time to discussions about good client service is an excellent way to keep the topic in the forefront. However, until compensation is affected negatively for failures in client service and positively for meeting the firm's standards, the culture-shift needle will not move. Law firm leaders should reconsider their bonus structure – as many currently are doing anyway – to be more deliberate and transparent in how rewards are doled out, and part of the equation should factor in instances of excellent client service.

Remember that Everything Speaks

Everything the client sees when visiting the firm is a part of the "client experience." It is difficult to feel comfortable and appreciated in an uninviting environment. Make certain that public areas of the firm – particularly reception areas, the coffee room and conference rooms – are clean, well lit, uncluttered and in good repair. If attorneys frequently invite clients into their personal offices, encourage them to see their office through the clients' eyes. Are there stacks of files everywhere? Is there a chair for the client? Is there anything offensive on display? Similarly, your non-physical spaces also should be clean and uncluttered. Law firm websites must be easily navigable to avoid causing your visitors frustration. Copy should be written with a focus on the client and avoid legal jargon where possible. Value-added content, such as white papers and webinars, should be posted prominently to enhance the client experience.

Give Clients Multiple Ways to Provide Feedback

Regardless of whether your law firm has committed or will commit to an ongoing formal feedback program, provide a variety of opportunities for clients to give their feedback, and let them know you value their input. Consider setting up an email address or a toll-free phone number where clients may leave confidential messages. Devote a portion of every newsletter to inviting clients to provide feedback of any type, and provide instructions for doing so. Include this same information with the final bill for each closed matter. Of course, it will be critical to act on feedback received.

Make a Public Commitment

What better way to establish accountability for law firms that have decided to make client service a strategic differentiator than to put their commitment in the public arena? Consider devoting a section of your website to outlining your client service commitment and, if appropriate, sharing some of the results.

There can be no question that in the current competitive, shrinking legal market those firms that place real value on an exceptional client experience are going to positively differentiate themselves. I look forward to seeing how far law firms are willing to go to establish such a standard.

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