

Establishing and maintaining good client relations 1621



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Total Quality Management, customer satisfaction index, zero defects, client service - all are

buzzwords of management in the 1990s. Yet what is all this about anyway?

After all, lawyers and

law firms successfully made it through the '80s without all the commotion about quality and service.

Why all the fuss now? Is this just another fad, some passing fancy that will come and go like

Hula-Hoops, disco dancing or designer jeans? Hardly. While the jargon may change over the

balance of the decade, a fundamental change is taking place in client service, and the attorneys who

realize this and change with it will be the attorneys who will be successful in the '90s and beyond.

All structures are built upon a foundation. A high-rise is built upon a foundation of concrete and steel.

The taller the building, the deeper and stronger the foundation required to support it. Similarly, a legal

practice is built upon a foundation, specifically upon the foundation of relationships with people. Like

the high-rise, the greater the intended accomplishment and productivity of the firm, the deeper and

stronger these bedrock relationships must be. In fact, the limits of accomplishment, productivity and

satisfaction within the firm are all a function of the nature and quality of the relationships the members

of the firm have developed with the firm's clients.

Jimmy Johnson, the only coach in football history to win both the National Collegiate Championship

and the Super Bowl, understood the critical importance of personal relationships when he grabbed

the reins of the Dallas Cowboys' franchise. In just three years, he took the league's worst team to the

pinnacle of professional success. In the locker room following the team's stunning Super Bowl

victory, Johnson poignantly told his team that, more than anything else about the day, they would

remember the love they had for each other. The team's success was built upon a foundation of strong

relationships, deep appreciation for one another and, yes, even love.

Likewise, truly successful lawyers have always built their practices upon a foundation of strong client

relationships. However, during the '80s, when a seller's market existed for legal practitioners, many

lawyers were able to build successful practices without this fundamental component. The tide has

turned though, and purchasers of legal services can now afford to be much more selective in their

choice of attorneys.

As with every other purchase decision, individuals prefer to do business with people they like, with

people who seem genuinely interested in them and with people who really care about their concerns.

Today, it is more important than ever that lawyers recognize and appreciate that they must build rich,

quality relationships with their clients and must orient their firms around assuring outstanding client

service.

This process starts with the initial interview. The worst mistake an attorney can make is to get right

down to business when first meeting a prospective client. The most critical result to be produced

during the first meeting is to begin to build a strong relationship of trust. The attorney should thank

the individual for coming to the firm and to out of his or her way to be warm and friendly. The lawyer

should never sit behind a desk. Instead, the attorney and potential clients should meet in a

comfortable neutral area and spend 10 to 15 minutes just getting to know one another. Business

shouldn't be discussed until the attorney is satisfied that he or she is comfortable with the prospective

client and, more importantly, that the client is comfortable with the attorney and the firm.

As the particular case is discussed, counsel must be sensitive to the developing relationship with the

potential client. If during the initial conversation the attorney doesn't feel that he or she will enjoy

working with this individual, if a sense of mutual admiration, respect and trust is absent, the attorney

should refer the client to a colleague. This may sound crazy, but should the client retain this attorney,

everyone will regret it later.

Consider your experience. Every really disgruntled client, every client you later regretted having

worked with, you suspected from the very beginning. Don't do it to yourself or the firm. Life is too

short. Only when both parties are satisfied that they enjoy working together and that the firm is

appropriate to handle the matter should an offer of representation be extended.

The importance of personal relationships is also true of requests for proposals. In-house counsel

sends the same RFP to many law firms, and everyone sends back pieces of paper. Unfortunately,

this prevents your firm's attorneys from demonstrating their warmth, friendliness and genuine care

and concern for the client, limiting your competitive advantage to your reputation and perhaps you

pricing structure. Before a proposal is ever requested or sent, research your potential clients and

begin to develop relationships with them in advance. Telephone counsel and find out what he or she

might be looking for in a firm. The call presents a great opportunity to begin building a long-term

relationship.

Even better, schedule a personal appointment or invite counsel to lunch.

Nothing makes a stronger

impression than a face-to-face meeting. The smart lawyer knows this. Don't rely solely on paper. Go

see counsel and ask lots of questions. Then, authentically look to see what would be in the client's

best interest and make recommendations based upon it. Even recommend a member of another firm

if it's appropriate. One successful Seattle lawyer always directs clients to attorneys whom he feels

are best-suited to the particular client and circumstances of the case. As a result, he is one of the

most highly respected attorneys in the city and consistently receives referrals in his own specialty.

Finally, throughout your firm's representation, don't forget to work on what built the relationship in

the first place. Maintain frequent communication with the client and continue to check on how he or

she is doing. This is the essence of service. Rather than assuming you're doing a good job taking care

of the client, ask the client if you are. Find out if he or she is getting what was expected. It's my

experience that most lawyers specifically don't ask the client if everything is satisfactory because they

don't want to find out that it isn't. This is a mistake. If the client is indeed dissatisfied, it's far better

that you know about it so you can at least have a chance to do something about it. If you don't ask,

on the other hand, the client will eventually let you know anyway, either by leaving, not paying their

bill or complaining about you to others. None of these alternatives are very desirable. Periodically,

ask the client if anything additional can be done for him or her. No customer satisfaction survey can

take the place of personal contact, old-fashioned courtesy and genuine concern.

No matter what you've heard, clients don't hire law firms or even lawyers, they hire people. Though

important, quality work and a result favorable to the client are no guarantee of continued client

loyalty, repeat business or the referral of friends and family. What makes clients come back and send

their friends to you is that they like you, and only you can see to that.

SUMMARY

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