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OUR 30TH YEAR

Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is On Client Service



Marci M. Krufka

By Marci M. Krufka

A recent survey of Chief Legal Officers revealed that the number one reason that clients fire law firms is lack of responsiveness.¹ Year after year, clients complain about the lack of responsiveness from their outside counsel, and year after year, many law firms do not do anything differently. Yet, if you ask law firms to rate themselves on client service, nine out of ten say they are “excellent.”

What can your firm do to truly distinguish itself for client service? In our experience, the disconnect between clients’ expectations and their lawyers’ ability to meet them can be traced to the failure of lawyers and law firms to seek meaningful feedback from their clients and then make improvements based upon that feedback. How can lawyers be responsive to clients’ wants and needs if they do not know what those wants and needs are?

The following are examples of actual lawyer comments regarding client feedback:

- “In one sense we get great feedback — [clients] pay the bills and engage us for new matters; however, there is little discussion of matters and how to improve, etc.”
- “...As outside counsel we usually assume no news is good news and that we will get feedback from clients when they are dissatisfied.”

Can lawyers with these views continue to be successful in the ultra-competitive legal market? Consumers in most other industries have been over-surveyed, yet many consumers of legal services remain unasked and unheard.

Lawyer personality data reveal that their aversion to feedback may not be due to a lack of concern for their clients, but rather to unique characteristics in the lawyer personality. Most lawyers have particularly low resilience — the quality that determines how well one responds to criticism and rejection. Accordingly, it is not surprising that asking for feedback is particularly difficult for lawyers.

If you are one of the relatively few law firms that does seek formal client feedback on a regular basis — congratulations. But what do you do with the feedback you receive? Too often we hear from in-house lawyers that when they have provided feedback to their outside firms, little, if anything, has been done in response.

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Creating a Strategy and a Plan

If your firm is serious about improving client service, and you really want to differentiate yourself from your competitors, you should:

- Conduct regular client surveys and interviews with your clients. If you conduct written surveys, ask your clients to waive the confidentiality of their responses so that you may more adequately address their needs.

as a team to discuss issues of concern

- who is responsible for each action item
- when each item will be completed

The Client Service Meeting

- When you hold “client service” meetings with clients, do not take them lightly and by all means be prepared. Showing up unprepared

feedback follow-up efforts a meaningful factor in compensation decisions. If your firm is serious about making client service a differentiating factor, it will reward those who take it seriously.

These things may seem fairly simple, but the truth is they require a significant investment of time and resources. There are many firms that say they are responsive, but in reality, there are few that have made formal client service efforts a regular practice. The firms who have developed and implemented successful key client programs have achieved better relationships with their clients and increases in revenues and profitability. Is your firm ready to put its money where its mouth is on client service? ♦

“The firms that have developed and implemented successful key client programs ... have achieved increases in revenues and profitability.”

- Respond promptly and directly to the client regarding any problem cited; tell them how you plan to correct the problem and correct it immediately.
- Form a client service team for each significant client. The team should include a mix of senior and junior lawyers from a variety of practice specialties relevant to the client.
- The team should prepare a client service plan detailing:
 - how team members will respond to each of the issues and opportunities raised by the client in feedback
 - what items of value team members will deliver to the client each quarter
 - how often the team will meet with the client at no charge

for these meetings may be worse than not showing up at all. Utilize your marketing department and other internal resources to conduct research on recent changes in the client’s business (department reorganizations, acquisitions of new subsidiaries, etc.), other new developments with the client (new product launches, new services offered, etc.) and relevant changes in the client’s industry or market that may have an impact on the client’s business.

- During client service meetings, refrain from the temptation to talk about yourselves or your firm. Concentrate on asking pertinent questions and actively listening to the responses.
- Use information gleaned from client meetings to improve your client service plans.
- From an internal perspective, make client service and client

¹ Altman Weil/American Corporate Counsel Association (ACCA) 2002 Chief Legal Officer Survey.

Marci M. Krufka is a consultant with Altman Weil, Inc., working out of the firm’s offices in Newtown Square, Pennsylvania. She can be reached at (610) 886-2000 or mmkrufka@altmanweil.com.

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