

Teaching Lawyers to Ask About Customer Service



by Dee A. Schiavelli

Good client service is an intangible experience, but “like pornography, I know it when I see it.”

When we ask our lawyers if they believe they are giving their clients good service, they will, of course, say yes. Some will say they give good service because they meet deadlines or return phone calls promptly, and some will actually say “If my client wasn’t happy, he would tell me.” But we all know that isn’t true. If our client doesn’t perceive he is receiving good service he won’t say anything to the attorney – he will just give the next piece of business to another law firm and tell all his friends about his displeasure.

Lawyers are smart and capable at practicing law, but they don’t always want to know if the client isn’t happy with the service provided. So they often don’t ask. But asking is critical if you want to keep your client. If you don’t ask, you can’t fix any problems. As many marketing gurus have said before me, what clients want is to make money, save money, sleep at night and look good to their superiors.

Real-World Example

I recently worked with a very senior partner at my firm who had a Fortune 50 client from whom he had received large fees for key litigation matters over a number of years. But the work was dwindling. Finally, after coaching from marketing, the partner called the client a few months after the latest matter and requested a meeting to have an end-of-matter review. Marketing prepared questions and coached the partner to ensure he asked focused questions and learned how to gain trust, gather important information on the client’s perspective of how the matter went and to find out what he could have done better.

If our client doesn’t perceive he is receiving good service he won’t say anything to the attorney – he will just give the next piece of business to another law firm and tell all his friends about his displeasure.

The client, fortunately, was happy with the results of the matter. However, he said he would have appreciated reports on the progress of the case that would have enabled him to present the information more effectively to his superiors. In essence, the client wanted our partner to help him look good. The partner realized this would have been an easy thing to

do, so he promised going forward he would do so. At the end of the meeting, the client gave our partner a new matter. He also told our partner how pleased he was about being asked for this feedback. This is an example of good client service.

Good client service is about relationships, not about law. Law is the service your lawyers provide, but what makes it good is how the client is treated. They want their law firm to understand their industry and the objectives of their firm. They don’t want their lawyers to talk down to them or their department associates. They want value from their lawyers – from clearly defined budgets to understanding what the client is supposed to accomplish. Good client service grows out of the established relationship. ■

Dee A. Schiavelli has more 16 years experience helping lawyers build their practices. She can be reached at 203/803.9317 or deeschiaivelli@yahoo.com.

Ask, Don’t Guess

What is good service for one client is not necessarily the best for another. That is why it is important to ask, “What does my client consider good service? How does my client want me to communicate with him?” You will often find that communication is the key aspect of good service. In a 2005 report from BTI Consulting Group, clients said that they wanted:

- More focus on strategy to achieve objectives;
- Better ways to articulate specific points of value;
- Budgets, especially for litigation and IP;
- More cost-conscious and cost-effective practices;
- Greater inclusion of in-house counsel;
- Risk-sharing; and
- Broader services from a single firm.

Most of these points are based on good communication between lawyers and their clients. Without understanding what the client wants – and this means your lawyers must ask and delve into the specifics of their clients’ needs – your lawyers will miss opportunities to provide good service.

If you’re not asking your clients what they want, someone else will. Find what your clients need and give it to them. It often has nothing to do with the law.

– Dee A. Schiavelli