

Going Back to Basics

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Client Relationship Essentials

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GOING BACK TO BASICS

It may be trite but it is absolutely true, that you cannot practice law if you don't have a client. Notwithstanding that fundamental fact, law firms have traditionally failed to address client service in any meaningful way. If there is any consideration to client satisfaction, it is an afterthought at best. If you think about it, this is not really surprising since the traditional billing system in law firms really discourage lawyers, especially juniors, from spending time on "superfluous" matters like improving their firm's service. Most law firms reward only those that churn out gruelling hours on a file, with little regard to the level of service provided to a client. It is more often about quantity than quality. How then, can we expect busy lawyers to take time from the race to meet their billing targets to consider how best to keep their clients happy?

In Cordell Parvin's blog post titled "*12 tips to Make your law Firm One of the Few Your Clients Will Recommend*"¹, he suggests that while it seems like a "no-brainer" that if one wants higher profits one should focus on client service, in practice, few firms can answer the following questions confidently:

- When was the last time you talked about client service at a firm meeting?
- When was the last time you talked to your professional staff about client service?
- When was the last time your firm did any training on client service?
- When was the last time you talked to your clients about client service?"

I can tell you the answer to these questions for most lawyers and law firms is not very often or not at all. You would not be alone if you read those questions and sheepishly answered "never", "I don't remember", "wait...lawyers do that?!" Client service is a foreign concept to most lawyers. In order to do our job efficiently, we often try to keep clients at arm's length, viewing them as just another file. In fact, when I first started my practice, I was advised that the client is the enemy who will turn on you at any time. Lawyers are commonly warned right from law school to "cover your ___" when dealing with clients. When lawyers take such a clinical approach to clients, it is little wonder that more and more clients are reporting dissatisfaction with their law firms.

So why then, is there now a major movement towards improving client service? The answer is simple: in this golden age of social media and internet, word spreads quickly if your firm isn't going

¹ "12 Tips To Make Your Law Firm One Of The Few Your Clients Will Recommend | Cordell Parvin Blog". *Cordell Parvin Blog*. N.p., 2017. Web.

above and beyond for a client. Consumers are getting smarter and wiser. They will happily take their money elsewhere (and there are a lot of choices these days) if they aren't getting the right "feel" from your firm. Customer service, according to Terry O'Reilly of CBC's "Under the Influence", is "one of the most important factors in the success of any company. Most companies in the world provide terrible customer service at worst, or basic customer service at best." In the past, because lawyers deemed themselves to be highly intelligent learned professionals, it inevitably led to them having an inflated view of themselves. They would take a very paternalistic approach to their client's legal problems and assumed that they knew best, often not even asking the client what outcome they wanted. This "arrogant" attitude still exists today, but lawyers and firms are increasingly realizing that the old aloof model is no longer good enough, and that a new client centred focus is the way to achieve client satisfaction and loyalty. This is what will give a firm or lawyer a competitive advantage.

LAW FIRMS, WE HAVE A PROBLEM

In the article "*Client Service: The New Normal in the Legal Industry*"² author Marni Becker-Avin states "Like it or not, law firms have to become client-centric. Excellent client service is not just a nice idea anymore. It is a necessity. If firms do not make it a high priority, clients will eventually go elsewhere."

She points out that in business, successful companies have customer service departments and train their employees in proper customer care. This is becoming the norm because companies have come to realize that if they are going to stand out, they must focus on customer service as that is what will differentiate them from other companies. However lawyers, while trained to deliver excellent legal work, are not often trained to provide excellent client service. In fact many lawyers do not see "client service" as part of their job. Ms. Becker-Avin tries to dispel this delusion by pointing out that "We are in a service industry. Yet many in the profession do not understand that client service is an integral part of the "product" and that clients will pay for superior client service because it is a value-added proposition". She suggests that a "radical shift in the basic beliefs of the profession as a whole is needed."

Many of the articles I read for this paper suggested that clients are dissatisfied with the service that they receive from law firms. BTI Consulting Group of Wellesley, Massachusetts conducted surveys of General Counsel at a wide range of large corporations. Michael B. Rynowecer of BTI wrote an article titled "*The Declining Client Satisfaction Antidote*"³. He stated that BTI's research showed that "7 out

² "Client Service: The New Normal In The Legal Industry". *Becker-poliakoff.com*. N.p., 2017. Web.

³ "The Declining Client Satisfaction Antidote". *Managingpartnerforum.org*. N.p., 2017. Web.