

Customer Service in the Law

By Chet Olsen, Esq.

Working in the law, like working in most other professional fields, entails a certain amount of customer service. Some might say the customer service aspects of the job are the most important, especially if you want to get ahead in a large firm.

When I graduated from law school, I went to **work as an associate** in a very large law firm. One partner I worked for was the highest-compensated attorney in the entire firm, based on his ability to bring in and keep clients. And one partner I worked for had such dismal legal skills that we used to say that he "practiced law at the sixth-grade level." Interestingly, these partners I refer to-the rainmaker and the no-legal-skills partner-were the same person.

How is it that someone who really isn't a good lawyer can thrive in the law firm environment? The answer is that this one partner was skillful at providing customer service. He may not have been a modern day Clarence Darrow, but never did a phone call go unreturned for more than an hour. Never was a deadline missed. Never was a board meeting, office party, or other client event held without his attendance. This partner would even attend funerals of employees of his clients.

Some people think practicing law is mostly customer service. More experienced lawyers will often say it is ninety percent of the practice of law.

The truth is that clients often don't know the quality of your advocacy or **document-drafting ability**. Lawyering skills are often assumed and, while a certain level of competency (the sixth-grade level) is needed, often the only time a client knows there is a problem is if you foul something up pretty badly and it comes to their attention.

On the other hand, a client will always know, and remember, if you returned phone calls and emails in a timely fashion. He/She will also keep in mind whether you delivered when you said you would, whether you are accessible, and whether you are attentive to his/her needs. It's really true that lawyers can sometimes hide their level of competency, but being nonresponsive will never go unnoticed.

I don't recall seeing a customer service course at my law school, and I don't think I've heard of one being offered elsewhere. While there are many aspects to providing excellent service, there are certain core things a lawyer can do to make sure he/she is serving the client in a way that makes the client highly aware of it.

Return phone calls. Not returning phone calls is almost a cliché when people talk about lawyers. "I can't get my lawyer on the phone" is a constant complaint. This is unfortunate because picking up the phone is a fairly easy thing to do. Even if you have to tell the client that no progress has been made or there is no change, the contact is important. Sure, we all have emergency projects, and sometimes there is more than one to tend to during the course of the day. Still, your clients really don't care because they have their own emergencies. Returning a call three days later and explaining you were busy with other clients does not sit well with someone who is paying you a lot of money and who can easily hire another lawyer.

Push Out Information. Even better than returning phone calls in a timely fashion is contacting your clients and telling them what is going on. Most clients feel a bit helpless when they turn a matter over to you, and by the nature of what lawyers do for a living, that matter is probably of some importance to the client. It's a

good idea to prepare a periodic status report for your client. The frequency of this might be dictated by the urgency of the matter. Or you may simply call your client as soon as a development occurs. Clients like to feel informed even when there is no information.

Get Face Time. Email and the phone are great ways to be in contact with your client, but they do not replace being there. You might even need to stop the billable clock and have lunch with a client or show up at board meetings and similar events where you get to be in front of the client. If you're outside counsel, make others feel that you are nonetheless part of the team by attending team functions. While this will impress your clients, it will also help them keep you in mind and perhaps call you more often with projects than they would an attorney they don't see around the office.

Quality of Work Product. I made light of lawyering skills at the start of this article, but providing a quality work product is an obvious component of customer service. You should do everything you can to deliver a product that is as close to perfect as possible. This should be obvious, but it needs to be stated.

Make Your Deadlines. Think about when you buy something: The merchant indicates when it will be delivered, and that date comes and goes without delivery. There might be a lot of reasons for this, but you are nonetheless going to question the abilities of the merchant. Maybe you will decide to buy elsewhere next time just because of this. That's even truer when it comes to providing legal services. Real deadlines, such as filings, must always be met. Other deadlines, such as when the client asks for something or when you promised something, must also be met. With the latter types of deadlines, however, there will sometimes be circumstances that may prevent timely delivery. Always be sure to inform clients of this and let them know when the possibility of a late delivery arises.

Display a Good Attitude. There is a book entitled *Attitude is Everything* that emphasizes that the quality of almost everything in life depends on the attitude you attach to it. This is very true when it comes to servicing clients. Let's face it: Clients can sometimes be annoying. They know it; you know it. But you don't have to show that. Showing attentiveness and enthusiasm when you communicate with clients will go a long way to ensuring their loyalty.

Experienced lawyers will tell you how difficult it is to bring in a new client. They will also tell you how easy it is to lose a client. The good news is that it is very easy to know what a client wants. Clients want what you and I want when we hire someone. We want to get what we pay for, to feel we are being attended to and that we are a priority. Taking the steps outlined above will go a long way toward helping them feel that way.