

March 1, 2010

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Client interviews can provide important feedback



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Social media has received a lot of attention recently in law firm marketing circles. But buried beneath all the hype is one eternal truth: Selling legal services still requires a two-way dialogue.

While LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook can help to extend the conversation (and further build your reputation), if you are not speaking directly to your clients and referral sources, then you are missing important opportunities to build your relationships (and, ultimately, your practice).

Direct client communication is essential to the practice of law. If you are ethically obligated to carry out your client's wishes, then someone has to manage the client relationship and ensure that everyone on the legal team understands those objectives.

But what about once the matter has ended? How do you know if the client is truly happy? How do you know the client is likely to use your services the next time he has a need? How do you know the client will refer other prospective clients or think of your firm when a need arises outside of your own area of expertise?

Good service providers understand how important it is to ask customers for feedback. Many lawyers, on the other hand, never got that memo. Many presume that no news is good news. But failing to systematically seek out feedback from your best clients can be a very bad business decision.

- **Client interviews can uncover problems and identify opportunities**

Client interviews can reveal personality conflicts or service problems that need to be addressed (i.e., while there is still time to fix these problems). Interviews can uncover future needs that the client may have (which the firm may be able to serve). They can be an opportunity to educate the client about the other capabilities of your firm.

Asking your clients if they can be interviewed is a great way to demonstrate that you are truly concerned about their needs. In addition to making the client feel special, a good interview can give the client a chance to reflect on the services that they purchase (something they may not have previously done).

In short, client interviews are a great way to build the relationship. Nothing does more to build

a relationship than listening. If you take the time to really listen to your clients, in all likelihood the relationship will strengthen.

- **Use a respected partner or a trusted consultant, but choose someone with strong interpersonal skills**

Client interviews should be conducted by someone other than the relationship partner. You are looking for candid answers that will provide insight into how to strengthen the connection. If there are problems lurking beneath the surface of the relationship, they are less likely to emerge if the relationship partner asks the questions.

The interviewer can be someone in firm leadership or an external vendor. What is important is that the individual has the capacity to quickly put the client at ease and the ability to get clients to open up. The interviewer should be skillful in probing beneath the surface of the answers (i.e., not taking at face value what the client says without asking follow-up questions) and should have some understanding of the client's business, the nature of the work that is being performed for the client and the capabilities of the law firm.

While in-person interviews are most likely to elicit the feedback you truly want, it may be hard to justify the time and expense of traveling if the client is out of state. In that case, the interviewer should be extra certain to be properly prepared so that he can maximize the precious 30 to 45 minutes that the client may have.

Conclusion

If you have not taken the time to find out what your best clients really think, you may be missing important opportunities to improve your service or cross sell other areas of expertise at your firm.

While there is some expense associated with conducting these interviews (i.e., even if internal resources are deployed, you must still account for that individual's lost time), the expense is relatively small compared to many other forms of marketing and business development. And given the rich pool of information that a good interview can provide, the expense is well justified for most firms.

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