

What Your Clients Want...and Don't Want

By [Cordell Parvin](#) on September 20th, 2013

In 1991, [David Maister](#) wrote an article titled: [How Clients Choose](#). He described what it feels like to be a client. As you will see, he advises that clients feel they are taking a personal risk hiring a lawyer or law firm. They feel insecure, skeptical, concerned, exposed and threatened.

David Maister's article reminds me of advice, I received from my first mentor. It still resonates today. He told me:

When business clients find themselves in a jam, they want lawyers who inspire confidence. They want to believe you are the lawyer who can handle their problem.

Clients want lawyers who listen to them, analyze an issue carefully, reach an opinion and then have confidence they are advising the right approach.

[Jeff Pollock](#), a [Fox Rothschild](#) Princeton, NJ trial lawyer, represented a business client in a very complicated suit involving many plaintiffs. All of the other plaintiffs settled their cases receiving a small percentage of what they requested. Jeff developed a theory that, if successful, would clearly generate a higher settlement or verdict.

He confidently presented his thoughts to his client and told the client he was prepared to take the matter to trial. Jeff's client decided to proceed. Several years later Jeff's client settled for a multiple of what the other plaintiffs received.

["I Need a Hero", by Bonnie Tyler](#)

Since it is Friday, I can't resist referencing two songs that describe that kind of lawyer.

The first is [Holding Out for a Hero](#) by [Bonnie Taylor](#)



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I need a hero

I'm holding out for a hero 'til the morning light

He's gotta be sure

And it's gotta be soon

And he's gotta be larger than life

The second is [Simply the Best](#), also originally recorded by Bonnie Taylor, but I love the live version by [Tina Turner](#).

[19 Tina Turner Simply The Best LIVE Wembley YouTube2](#)



You're simply the best, better than all the rest

Better than anyone, anyone I've ever met

I don't know that clients want their lawyers to be heroes or even simply the best, but they certainly want to feel their lawyers are confident and competent to handle the client's matter.

What do clients not want? One time I asked a large construction company executive told me:

I don't want a lawyer to tell me at the beginning of a potential dispute that our case is solid, we can get to trial in 12 months and the cost will be \$200,000, and then two years later on the courthouse steps, after we spent \$500,000 tell me our case is no good and we must settle before trial.

Thankfully, he was not talking about me, but I still remember what he said.

You and I both know lawyers who are incredibly persuasive. Some of those lawyers are also arrogant, but they are skilled at hiding it when they are convincing potential clients to hire them.

Some of those lawyers tell potential clients what they want to hear and easily convince those clients to hire them. Some of those lawyer love landing the work, but hate actually doing it.

I know a lawyer who advised a client to threaten to file a suit without carefully analyzing what would be the impact of the threat, or the impact of actually filing the suit. His client was reluctant to start a costly law suit and questioned the lawyer on what the consequences might be, and what the lawyer believed should be the ultimate goal.

The lawyer forgot one of the most important words in client relationships. The word is *because*. He did not say: I think you should threaten to file suit because... and then present a well thought out reason and rationale for filing suit.

When the client's adversary got wind of the potential law suit, their lawyer carefully laid out all the negative consequences that might happen if the suit was filed. The adversary's lawyer even suggested a plan to avoid the lawsuit. That made the lawyer's client even more reluctant to file the suit. It also caused the client to question their persuasive lawyer's judgment and competence.

The suit was not filed. Instead of acknowledging a mistake, the lawyer tried to convince the client that this had been his plan all along.

What is the lesson here? I think it is simple to say and more challenging to actually implement.

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Your clients want you to listen, carefully analyze their situation and give them advice on what they should do with reasons supporting that advice. They also want to feel you are confident in the advice you are suggesting.

Clients do not want you to tell them what they want to hear. Clients very rarely want to file a suit if there is any other viable option. Clients do not want you to give them advice without listening, or without carefully analyzing the consequences, of the advice. Perhaps, as important, clients do not want you to make them look bad in their industry or in public.

Cordell M. Parvin built a national construction practice during his 35 years practicing law. At Jenkens & Gilchrist, Mr. Parvin was the Construction Law Practice Group Leader and was also responsible for the firm's attorney development practice. While there he taught client development and created a coaching program for junior partners. In 2005, Mr. Parvin left the firm and started Cordell Parvin LLC. He now works with lawyers and law firms on career development and planning and client development. He is the co-author of ***Say Ciao to Chow Mein: Conquering Career Burnout*** and other books for lawyers. To learn more visit his Web site, www.cordellparvin.com or contact him at cparvin@cordellparvin.com.