



## The end of lawyers? Pah! This is the time of the 'super lawyer'.

In March, Alastair Moyes of MarketLaw stated that 'law firms need to work hard in the face of commoditised legal providers'. Last month he bravely stuck his neck out and suggested that we, today's lawyers, need to embrace radical change and reinvent customer service to avoid our industry 'becoming the nearly dead dinosaur that the US car industry became'.

I reckon Alastair makes two very poignant points. Let's face it, the 2008-2010 global recession combined with the Legal Services Act 2007 has given us a wake-up call. Throw the enlightened consumer, digital era and recent technological advances into the mix and what have we got? Our traditional way of life under threat.

We can no longer afford to be Luddites because the transformation of how the world of legal business operates is already underway. Competition from consumer-centric major players, 'DIY free legal documents providers' via the internet and virtual law firms are already challenging our established engagement model, increasing client confidence, levels of expectation and setting new standards in customer service.

If we consider Professor Richard Susskind's predictions in relation to the role of lawyers and law firms in the new world of consumer legal services (detailed in his provocative 2008 book *The End Of Lawyers?*), there is further change on the horizon.

The predictions detailed in Susskind's 1996 book *The Future of Law* have already come to fruition. Perhaps we should heed his recent prediction that the market is not going to tolerate costly lawyers for jobs that can equally or better be undertaken by less-expensive workers or through smart systems and processes. Enter 'de-lawyering' (passing work to paralegals and legal executives), 'disruptive' technologies (computerised systemising, packaging or commoditising), entrepreneurial alternative providers and streamlined law firms.

It's now 2010. What Susskind wrote about in 2008 we are witnessing. Quoting *Neuromancer* author William Gibson, whether we like it or not 'the future is here ... it's just not widely distributed yet'. It begs the question, will traditional lawyers be needed? The answer, you're no doubt pleased to hear, is that it's not all doom and gloom.

Susskind believes that some tasks, for example those requiring deep expertise or interpersonal communication, will still require the traditional lawyer. Furthermore, as to whether law firms can survive, he believes that entrepreneurial law firms will not see threats in all of these developments and some will actually find opportunity. I would add that entrepreneurial lawyers recognise this and have already begun to act. You will identify these lawyers as bastions of light blazing a trail in customer service excellence and innovation while doing battle with colleagues who are stuck in their Dickensian ways. Inertia and resistance to change always reminds me of Einstein's view that 'great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds'.

I passionately believe that traditional lawyers, entrepreneurial lawyers and the next generation have a wonderful opportunity in this enlightened, consumer-led digital era to become 'super lawyers'.

What do I mean by 'super lawyers'? Let's propose that the most expensive piece of real estate is what lies between our ears ('deep expertise' as Susskind calls it – I call it 'lawyerly intellectual capital' (LIC)), and that there is LIC too complex to be commoditised (which there undoubtedly is), requiring interpersonal communication and intrapersonal communication. Accordingly, LIC is where the true value lies. Arguably, what we need to ensure is that we can effectively communicate that LIC is what the consumer needs, wants and desires of us. Enter 'soft-skilling' to improve our powers of persuasion, communication, relationship building, marketing, cross-selling, up-selling and selling per se.

If technology can take away as much grunt work as possible and leave the real LIC of value to the super lawyer then that should be something we welcome, right? To survive and thrive in the years to come I propose that a paradigm shift is required in the thinking, behaviour, actions, focus and expectations of both the law firm (partners/owners/directors) and the next generation of lawyers.

As both a lawyer and an entrepreneur (legal purchaser), I believe that the lawyer's role is not just about being technically proficient in the use of words (drafting and advising) – it's much more than that. Actually being able to truly relate and care about the client and his/her business and/or predicament is fundamental to what true lawyering and LIC is all about. Extraordinary relationships and customer service will be the holy grail at the heart of the successful super lawyer. Building an enduring value relationship with the consumer, utilising 'fluffy soft-skills stuff' combined with a total consumer-centric focus is where the real value will be for the lawyer, law firm and consumer of today and the future.

All of the above may actually just give the legal industry a *raison d'être*. I came to the profession in later life (working in a mid-tier established law practice for the past three years) with prior customer service exposure, experience and responsibility having worked in the new media, management consulting and leisure industries. Consequently, I can wholeheartedly agree with Alastair that the legal industry needs to embrace radical change, reinvent customer service and work hard (and smart) in light of the inevitable commoditisation of legal provision.

However, I seriously question whether established law firms and ‘traditional lawyers’ are geared up, positioned and truly prepared for the competitive challenges ahead. Are we confident that we already possess the skills required to become super lawyers? If not, the godsend is that with ever-increasing availability and acceptance of the delivery of soft-skill coaching to the profession there is help at hand.

Reinventing customer service will require every lawyer to embrace and action a consumer-centric mindset and behaviour – a paradigm shift in most instances. Scary as this might seem, failure to do the same may well mean that ‘the end of lawyers’ could actually come to pass – for some traditional lawyers. Perhaps the most famous epitaph in the world is the one alleged to be on the tombstone of WC Fields. As an everlasting reflection of the love-hate relationship with his ‘beloved’ hometown Philadelphia, his epitaph reads ‘all things considered, I’d rather be in Philadelphia’.

As I contemplate the threat of our possible extinction, all things considered, I think I’d rather be a super lawyer. Wouldn’t you?

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