

How to Keep Happy Clients Who are Delighted to Pay Their Bills

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Every good business client already has a lawyer, and your best client is the No. 1 target of a competing lawyer. It's important to retain the clientele you have now. Savvy lawyers hold onto their best clients and keep them as loyal fans who recommend them by using a special trick employed in the retail world.

It's a trick used by Nordstrom department stores, L.L. Bean, Trader Joe's food stores, Starbucks, and JetBlue Airways known as "great customer service." Business Week named the 50 "[The Customer Service Elite](#)" for 2008 and nary a law firm is on the list. Yet Southwest Airlines, Ritz-Carlton and Lexus use great customer service to keep devoted customers coming back again and again – and so can lawyers.

I have been interviewing clients about what they like and don't like about their lawyers. It's easier than you think to provide great customer service, and here's what it looks like for lawyers:

Be responsive and give clients what they want. Return all calls within 24 hours. The biggest complaint about lawyers is that they don't return calls. So if they send you an email, a letter or phone call – just respond. If you can't do it, make sure your legal assistant or an associate gets back to them right away. And when they ask for something – like updates in the middle of cases or transactions – *give it to them*. You know the legal services that they *need*, but loyal clients get what they *want* from their lawyers.

Find ways to save the client money. Suppose your client is one of dozens in a catchall list of defendants in a lawsuit, and you know they don't belong in the case. You could file a motion to dismiss, but that would take time and cost money. Or you could call the adverse lawyer, ask him to voluntarily dismiss your client without prejudice. Then you call your client and tell them (a) that you got them out of the case and (b) you did it with a phone call. The client will be thrilled.

Be civil, don't be a scorched-earth lawyer. Clients basically want sound advice. One client told me that one of the better features of his lawyer was that he wasn't strident or overly aggressive. Clients want somebody working for them who is reasonable and measured, and won't lead the client down an expensive path of pointless battles. Sure, there are "pit bull"

lawyers who fight everything all the time, but nobody likes them. Especially clients. One client wanted to bring a motion for sanctions against the adversary lawyer because their interrogatories weren't answered promptly. Their own lawyer said, "I know the attorney and I can talk to them." You just saved your client a pile of money.

Tell clients way in advance of costly new developments. "No surprises," is the rule. One lawyer spotted an issue in a case that would require an expensive expert. He called the client 60 days in advance and said he'd collect C.V.s and give the client some options. The client loved it, because they were given time to make a decision and information to give input on the case.

Don't turn in bills that will start an argument with your clients. Savvy lawyers submit bills promptly, make them fit the client's preferred format and demonstrate that not a minute was wasted. These are the lawyers who get paid immediately and in full. Clients are afraid they'll get bamboozled by padding or needless churning of time in a lawyer's bill. That's why an industry of auditors has grown who meticulously evaluate every 1/10 of an hour in a lawyer's bill. Clients hate to hassle lawyers over their bills as much as the lawyers hate being hassled. But if you're known as a lawyer whose bills never create issues, the client will be delighted.

Answer quick questions for free. Lawyers with loyal clients will answer their quick questions for a case citation or a summary of a statute, even though they give away dozens of hours a year doing so. It's important not to charge the client, and state that fact on this invoice so they are aware of it. The reward is that the client will remain with you forever and recommend you to other new clients. Contrast this with lawyers who charge two-tenths of an hour for reading a client's email. Clients of these lawyers feel they've been chiseled.

Take a sincere interest in the client's business. Visit the client, read the trade magazines that they read, and learn the lingo of the trade. This will impress clients and make yourself stand out. One client said his lawyer went so far as to get an advanced certification in the client's business and make presentations at the client's trade organization. "We like that a lot," the client said.

Be a loyal lawyer. Avoid asking clients to waive of conflicts of interest, and don't take new business clients who compete head-to-head with your current client. Remember that clients will Google their lawyers. If the lawyer has a website that says they defend trucking companies, but also have a plaintiff's practice of suing trucking companies – the client will notice. "When I see that happen, I quit using the lawyer," a client said.

Here's a list of tactics that clients *hate*.

Routinely delegate matters to less-experienced associates. If you are attorney the client hired, they expect *you* to personally to handle their matter. They don't like it when they discover a 25-year old associate did all the work and essentially was trained on the client's dime. It's quite different if the client assigns you an esoteric matter of law that's not in your proficiency. If you tell the client you're delegating the matter to a partner who's an expert in the topic, and who can get the job done better than you can do it, they will respect that decision

Act annoyed when clients call and tell them you're so busy. Remember that a call from a client is not an interruption; it's the reason you are in law practice. Sure, clients can be a pain in the neck and require excessive handholding, but do not show your irritation. If you tell a client with an annoyed voice that you are drowning in work, you've just made them feel unimportant. They'll be reluctant to call you again and will find a lawyer who is willing to listen to them.

Take on too much work so that the client has to push you to get the case moving. Business clients want their cases resolved quickly, because to them a legal matter is a business expense. Don't be the lawyer that clients have to stay on top of, and feel they have to push to keep things moving ahead. Clients complain about these lawyers and avoid giving them new work. If you find you have several ancient matters that are dragging on forever, set up a meeting with the client and develop an action plan to clear them off your docket.

Be aloof and avoid creating a personal relationship. This coldness will hurt even the most experienced and skilled lawyer. What clients want is a personal counselor or a trusted business advisor – someone who makes it clear they *care* about the client. Rainmakers already know this, and play golf and go to sports events with clients, visit client offices to make “wellness visits,” and invite clients to their homes for dinner. The clients love it and reward the rainmakers with new files and recommendations.