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SUCCESSING AS A YOUNG LITIGATOR

A Little Client Service Goes a Long Way

By Joseph Siprut

There are many exceptional attorneys in the legal marketplace—truly remarkable attorneys with exceptional skill—but not all of them are fully satisfying their clients. Why? The answer is that the same skill set that equates to legal or courtroom victories does not always equate to excellent customer service skill. For example, it is well known that the most frequent complaint clients have about their lawyers is that they don't return phone calls. Yet many lawyers continue to sin thusly. As explained below, a little client service goes a long way.

Be the lawyer your client wants you to be.

Clients are like snowflakes; no client is exactly like another. A large part of successful client service is being the lawyer your client wants you to be. For example, some clients need you to be a good listener, to sit there patiently and listen to a rant about an awful business partner. Fine. Sit there and listen patiently. Other clients may be exactly the opposite, wanting to spend as little time as possible dealing with the minutia of the case. With these clients, keep conversations brief, and tell them a draft will be sent over for their review. Examples are myriad, but the point is that lawyers who keep their clients happy do so in part by reading the particular client and adapting, instead of forcing the client to adapt. As no less than Abraham Lincoln himself once said, "If you understand what people want, you can do a better job for them."

Understand your client's objectives and explain whether the law can address them.

At the earliest possible opportunity, find out what the client's goals are and what the client hopes to accomplish through litigation. The time for your client to discover that the law does not supply the remedy sought is not on the eve of trial. Failing to ascertain the client's true objective—and failing to explain how and why such remedies may be impossible to attain—is a surefire way to leave the client disappointed, even if you "prevail" on the underlying litigation.

When the client calls you, do not act as if it's an imposition.

Remember: you are there to serve the client, not the other way around. Answer questions patiently and thoroughly.

Return messages!

There is simply no excuse for failing to return a client's phone calls or emails. Even if you are in trial all day, return your calls at 1:00 a.m. if you have to; at least leave a message letting the client know that you tried to return the call, that you are currently in trial, but that you will try again the next day. If the client has a simple question that can be answered in a quick voicemail or email, then do so; don't spend a week trying to schedule a call just to address a question that can be answered in 10 seconds.

Don't be all business, all the time.

Ask the client about family and the kid's baseball game the night before. And above all, if you spend five minutes chatting about sports, do not bill the client for that time!

Put simply, developing superior legal skill is only part of what it takes to serve your clients well. Because so many lawyers inexplicably fail to master the client-relations side of the practice of law, however, the good news is that there is a tremendous competitive advantage for those lawyers who possess both legal acumen and client relations skills.

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