



The Pheromone of Client Service

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By David H. Freeman

Make no mistake — they're out there, on the prowl, and focusing their attention on your best clients. Using subtle yet powerful attractants, your competitors are engaging in an ongoing courting ritual designed to shift your clients' affections. The secret formula in this mating dance, the magic elixir designed to overwhelm a client's senses, is the pheromone of client service.

Client service is the lure that drives clients wild. It is a powerful intoxicant that can loosen long-standing bonds, establish new connections, and move clients up the relationship chain to becoming fiercely loyal, referral-generating machines.

Don't We Already Provide Good Enough Service?

Statements like, "We pride ourselves on delivering outstanding levels of client service" sound great. They are the Pavlovian pabulum we whip out when we meet new clients, promote ourselves on our Web sites, write the openings of our RFPs, and attract laterals. The problem is, they're just not true. These written and verbal "promises" are usually more aspirational than actual, especially when looking at how well we deliver on these promises on a consistent, firm-wide basis.

One reason for the failure to live up to a high standard is that many lawyers suffer from a form of self-deception. For evidence of this delusion, we need look no further than a survey of General Counsels and outside lawyers conducted in 2006 by *Inside Counsel* Magazine. In this survey, inside and outside lawyers were asked to evaluate levels of client service. Fifty-two percent of the outside lawyers gave themselves an "A" rating, while only 21% of clients agreed. When asked if levels of client satisfaction had improved, 68% of the lawyers said "yes," while only 32% of clients were of the same opinion.

Is Client Service Really That Important?

People act based on how they perceive the world. Looking at two extremes, some lawyers believe long-term clients possess the unflinching loyalty of a Sancho Panza, following them no matter the missteps. Others take a Scheherazade-like approach, delivering exceptional value in every interaction in order "stay alive" for yet another day.

Research conducted by the BTI Consulting Group urges us to learn more from "*One Thousand and One Nights*" than from the characters of "*Don Quixote*" to understand the prevalence of client loyalty. One study reveals that 46.5% of corporate counsel surveyed stated they had ousted their primary law firms during the prior 18 months. We also learn that only 34.6% of corporate counsel recommended their primary law firms (*Strategic Outlook and Review for the Legal Industry*, presented at the LMA annual meeting, March 13, 2008). In short, loyalty just ain't what is used to be.

Another blind spot for some (especially more senior) lawyers is that loyalty is generated as long as you get a great result. In today's marketplace, this myth is quickly dispelled when looking at additional BTI research. When Fortune 1000 counsel were asked what it took to get short-listed, an overwhelming 75% said they looked for exceptional client focus, whereas only 12.5% stated they were swayed by legal skills ("*How Clients Hire, Fire and Spend*," 2006 survey of 250 Corporate Counsel at Fortune 1000 Companies). The lesson here is that while the end result is important, it's often a given — the real differentiator lies in the quality of the experience clients have while working with their outside lawyers.

Another Argument for Client Service

There are other reasons to fiercely protect the family jewels. By providing exceptional client service, firms can significantly add to their revenue. Looking again at BTI research, they identified what they called the "*Client Service Doubling Factor*," which recognized that when a client's primary law firm was also seen as best in delivering client service, it received over double the revenue of primary firms that did not achieve that best-in-class status.

The Major Ingredients

The research, along with our own experience, tells us we have a quiet crisis on our hands. The solution is to treat clients like they're the most important people in the world. Your lawyers need to anticipate, learn, invest in the relationship, and become easily and readily available — in short, they must prove they care.

Becoming a master of client service takes work. It requires time, awareness, creativity, teamwork, trust, initiative, and stamina. The end goal is to develop a solid interpersonal relationship with the client by making working with your firm an exceptional experience. Let's take the mystery out of this process by identifying five major areas in which your lawyers should excel:

Know their business. Get your lawyers thinking like clients by having them understand their industries, their challenges, their goals and aspirations. Have them read industry publications, visit their facilities, attend strategic planning sessions, and join them at industry conferences.

Be highly responsive ... with an emphasis on "highly." Since I've never heard a lawyer admit to being unresponsive, this may require reframing their perceptions. While some lawyers think it's OK to return a client call within 24 hours, clients may believe an hour is too long. Gather your lawyers together and have them brainstorm what it means to be responsive. The range of ideas will be impressive.

Be proactive. Ask your lawyers to think like in-house counsel by anticipating their clients' needs. Cross-selling (perhaps reframed as cross-serving) is actually one way to do this. Turn your lawyers into client advocates, whose role is to find the right people in your firm to anticipate and solve problems before they become too large.

Add value. Anyone can offer a legal solution, but few offer in-house training, sit in on board meetings, provide updates on legal developments, conduct audits, and offer the use of the firm's conference rooms for a client's important meetings. Go beyond what is expected — it is noticed and appreciated.

Manage the relationship. Expectations are variable creatures, differing from one person to another. Where one client wants weekly update reports, others don't want to be bothered. Where one wants an aggressive, take-no-prisoners style of litigation, another wants to negotiate mutually agreeable outcomes. The secret is to understand their expectations when opening the matter; to check-in during the relationship to see if any adjustments need to be made; and to meet at the conclusion of the matter to receive feedback (and, if things went well, learn if they have any other areas where you can help).

The Role of Leadership

When we know 80%-90% of our revenue comes from existing clients, and at the same time fail to implement a rigorous client service process, we hurt both our firm and our clients. There is no more important job for a leader than encouraging across-the-board delivery of exceptional service. This message must be shouted from the mountaintops, as well as demonstrated, managed, recognized and rewarded more often than you can stand. The following are some steps to consider for building a more robust approach:

- Agree upon and commit to a defined set of client service standards.
- Turn fluffy, high-level strategic statements into real, definable, measurable action steps.
- Provide training and ongoing reminders focused on what it takes to meet and exceed a client's expectations.
- Include client service as a significant factor in compensation.
- Give leaders the power to enforce standards (carrot and stick).
- Provide role models, teach the skills, give opportunities to practice, and supply meaningful feedback. One great rehearsal hall is within your own firm, where lawyers can deliver exceptional service to each other.

Conclusion

In a world of fungible legal services, you need to find the best ways to become outstanding. When your leaders learn how to activate the dormant client service gene in your lawyers, you can protect your clients from encroachment, uncover new opportunities with existing clients, and attract new clients. Not only will you build barriers to the courting, wooing, and preening of your competitors, but you will also develop fans for life. It should be the goal of every firm to move from the platitudes of lip service to the realities of extraordinary service.

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