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Communication is key to keeping clients satisfied

By: Laura Brown December 2, 2021

Law is a service industry. Like other service industries, the legal industry is subject to an evolving "on demand" customer who wants better results—and faster results—than ever before. Dissatisfied clients used to be less of an issue before the age of online reviews. Now, bad reviews can greatly impact business.

Yet, few lawyers are even aware of how their client feels representation went unless the client threatens a malpractice suit. While the field has talked for some time about being client-centered—that is, with the client and their needs as the center of what the firm does—the talk often does not translate into action. This is why client satisfaction with legal services has been lower than 20% in some years.

Fortunately, that's not the case for all attorneys. Four attorneys in Minnesota exemplify client-centered practices and have shared insight about why clients are so often disappointed in their representation and how to fix it.

Rachel Dahl is an attorney with Maslon LLP. Sybil Dunlop is an attorney at Greene Espel. Sarah Soucie Eyberg owns Soucie Eyberg Law LLC. Joseph Flanders owns Flanders Law Firm LLC.

Poor communication and bad experiences with lawyers (both personally and reports from others) are leading reasons that clients are not happy, said Flanders. "I have found that there is an inherent amount of distrust of lawyers and the law. I find that sad." He argues that this has been exacerbated by the pandemic, where clients are having some of the most important moments of their lives held on Zoom, and it fuels their concern that justice is not being done.

Eyberg cites an unequal footing between lawyer and client where the lawyer understands the legal process while the client typically does not. She mitigates this by describing to her clients, ahead of time, what will happen and roughly how long it will

"I make sure to outline how long a matter typically takes at each step of representation and I provide the client with a brochure to that effect also for their reference," Eyberg said. "And after we pass each stage (denial of initial application, request for

Some of the disconnect has to do with legal jargon, as well, said Dahl. "Lawyers speak a language people don't hear every day, and clients can feel intimidated and perhaps like their questions are silly." Flanders works against that intimidation even from his firm's website, which reads: "You can call me Joe. I treat all my clients like I would my mom or my brother."

Dahl even considers further communication subtleties. "I pay attention to body language and the client's expressions, use of pauses when speaking, etc., and if I don't think the client is ready to move on to the next topic, we focus more on what he/she needs in order to feel comfortable." The pandemic has made this more challenging, and Dahl stresses that "I don't think there is a good substitute for face to face interaction."

Even pre-pandemic, Flanders has found a shift away from in-person meetings to text messages, which he says he does not prefer. "I will say that there is more of a disconnect now in communication that there maybe was even 15 years ago when I started practicing," Flanders said, citing the move to electronic forms of communication.

The pandemic, of course, forced firms to use technology regardless of preference. It has not been all bad, according to Dunlop. "Zoom has made it much easier to see your clients when you check in with them — it's enabled us to break up deposition preparations into multiple days of shorter blocks instead of having a client come into the office for a full day of (tiring) prep." Additionally, Dunlop said, "clients can also more easily attend hearings on Zoom."

Client management system's automations help ensure client satisfaction, said Eyberg. "In my CMS, I can track matters, put them in different stages of litigation, assign tasks and reminders and calendar appointments and send documents for signature. I can create intake forms and send directly through the web-based software that will automatically create new contacts and matters when the clients complete them."

Regardless of how communication happens, all the attorneys cited great communication as a key to having happy clients. Dunlop said it is critical for attorneys to check in with clients during representation and not waiting until after it is over to see how it went.

"Surveys after [service] may be too late!" Dunlop said. "I try to provide weekly updates throughout the case and every few months call to make sure everything is OK (and people are feeling good about the service)."

Dahl said she does not believe that clients need daily, involved check-ins to be satisfied but maintains that clients ought to be kept in the loop if they have reached out. "If you cannot get back to someone immediately with a full response, let them know that and that you will be in touch soon. They appreciate the time you take to give them even a brief response."

Dunlop agrees. The other thing that makes people feel heard is responding to them promptly. "I always try to write back to any inquiry noting 'Got it! I'll plan to respond fully by X time, unless you tell me you need it earlier.'" She even thinks it is important to stay in touch if there is no news.

"Checking in with clients (even to tell them that there's no update) is important and lets people know that you are thinking about them even if you're all still just waiting for the order to be decided." Eyberg notes that it is important to not just wait until the client reaches out to you to communicate, claiming that "if a client feels that they are always the one doing the reaching out for status updates and the like, they will wonder how important their matter really is to the attorney."

Some lawyers insist that an attorney can do everything right, but a client can still be unhappy, particularly if they lose. Flanders insists that most clients are not only happy if they win, but content so long as their attorney has accurately portrayed their side of the story.

"I do think that people accept decisions by judges or mediators (the deciders) when their side of the story was properly presented," he said. "People are never as upset about decisions that are not in their favor when their story has been told."

While there is room for improvement in the profession as a whole, these attorneys have implemented practices that are a good start. As Flanders said, "It isn't about me (the lawyer), it is about the client. We get paid well to represent people. We all need to be reminded of that from time to time."



ABOUT LAURA BROWN



COMMENT

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