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Simple Gestures of Thanks Help Strengthen Client Relationships

Client Experience Corner

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Patricia Ellard

The holiday season is upon us and, on the heels of my favorite holiday Thanksgiving, I am taking time to celebrate life and those I am thankful for. However we choose to celebrate, I'm sure we all have traditions that demonstrate to our loved ones our gratitude and appreciation. In my experience, this celebration mostly takes place in our personal lives.

Over the last five years, as client listening and client experience programs have become the center of my professional life, I've realized that being grateful for my work, my colleagues, and my clients – both internal and firm clients – significantly impacts how grateful I am in my personal life. One is dependent on the other. As I reflect on what I have achieved and how I have managed to get here, it is very clear to me that I have not done it alone. I have needed and have been actively supported by others to become the professional I am today.

This sentiment is also in line with what we hear from our clients. Clients want to work with people that they know, like, and trust. They continually tell us in client feedback that they want to work with our attorneys for the long-term – they want to be in the trenches together and to create shared experiences. The most successful client-attorney relationships exist where mutual respect is earned, hard work is recognized and celebrated within the team, and each party knows they have the other's best interests at heart. Feelings of gratitude also permeate successful client-attorney relationships. True friendships develop in strong client relationships. These are not transactional interactions.

Adam Grant, well known organizational psychologist and leading expert on how we can find motivation and meaning, rethink assumptions, and live more generous and creative lives, posted this to Instagram last week:

Generosity is not a quest for appreciation. It is an act of care and contribution.

The point of giving is not to seek gratitude or receive recognition. It's to live by your principles.

True kindness isn't motivated by how others will react. It's an expression of who you are.

His post reminded me of the values I was brought up on that stay with me to this day: treat people as you want to be treated, and bring your authentic self wherever you go. This is character-building at its best.

So how do I show gratitude to colleagues and clients at work? First, by viewing thanks as what it is – a natural part of deepening relationships. Second, by demonstrating gratitude in a way that is authentic. And last, by sharing messages of thanks with no expectation of a response. As Grant says, this act of thanks is not motivated by how others will react. It is a statement of who you are as a person and how you want to be perceived.

We encourage our attorneys at this time of year to write personal notes of thanks to their clients and colleagues. Not emails, but handwritten notes, the kind that needs an envelope and a stamp. In our electronic-dominated life, it's rare to receive mail that is not in a windowed envelope requiring some kind of action. Think about the last time you received something personal in the mail – the sheer excitement of opening a card or a letter is reason enough to put pen to paper.

If this strikes a chord with you and you'd like to send your own words of thanks this year, here are a few suggestions for how you can do it:

- At Troutman Pepper, we supply a stack of personalized notecards to attorneys and encourage them to write several notes between November and December. Just because the Thanksgiving holiday is over doesn't mean it's too late to demonstrate your thanks.
- I keep a stack of blank or thank you cards in my desk drawer and choose one I think is particularly appropriate for the person or situation.
- I also keep "forever" stamps close by so I don't have the excuse that I need to go to the post office before I can send the cards.
- Depending on the relationship, and if writing a card isn't authentic to you, send an email or a text.
- Alternatively, pick up the phone and have a conversation or leave a voice message. I have been known to leave voice messages later in the evening for people who I know will not be available to take my call. It is important to me that they still hear my voice and hear the intended sentiment.
- When thinking about your message, think about what you are most thankful for from that person – a specific situation, a character trait, something that positively impacted you or your team – and why. Was there a specific situation where they went out of their way for you? Did they demonstrate character traits that you want to emulate? Maybe they made you feel like their door was always open to you and your colleagues.
- While the note doesn't have to be long, two to three sentences, the more tailored you can make it, the more genuine it will sound.
- Potential openers to these notes include: as I reflect on this year, I want to take the opportunity to say thank you for…, at this time of giving thanks, you are one to whom I particularly owe gratitude…, and we have worked closely together these last few months and I've really come to appreciate your ability to…

Remember that expressing thanks is not a sales opportunity. You do not need to set an expectation that you will follow up on your note or expect to hear anything in return. In fact, though some do, some recipients of these gestures of appreciation often do not actively acknowledge receipt of the note/email/text. But you will see from your ongoing interactions that the note has meant something special to them. Attorneys often mention to me that a few days or weeks after they've sent a note, a client will call to discuss a situation, will send a new matter, or provide a referral.

Ultimately, we grow by leaning on and learning from others. Relationships are built on caring and being vulnerable. In letting those around us know that we appreciate them, learn from them, and value their experiences, we are enriched as people, personally and professionally. It's one of the best ways to secure strong, long-lasting relationships.

Meet Patricia Ellard

With a background in competitive intelligence and strategic thinking, Patricia brings more than 20 years of experience in global management consulting and law firms to her role as director of client care analytics & service design. A highly inquisitive person with a passion for exploring, Patricia uses competitive intelligence sources and tactics combined with real-time client feedback to work with Troutman Pepper's Client Care and Innovation offices to develop tailored solutions for clients' problems. Working collaboratively with lawyers and clients, Patricia helps establish the foundation for successful client service.