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Tips for a Better Client Experience

Client Care Corner

WRITTEN BY

Erin Murphy

When I'm coaching attorneys on strengthening client relationships, I often ask them to think about their last big purchase. Was it a good or bad experience? Why?

Law firm clients are buying a very specific product, but they want many of the same things that any of us want when making a purchase. Chief among these is a good experience.

Your experience with a product or service influences how you feel about that purchase. It determines whether you will purchase again from the same seller and whether you recommend that seller to others. A client who has a good experience is more likely to hire you again, while a client who has a bad experience may go out of their way to tell others not to work with you.

I've had some memorable purchasing experiences recently that reminded me of key tips for lawyers seeking to improve their clients' experiences. Here are four easy ways to make, and keep, your clients happy.

Communicate Proactively and Respond Promptly

I recently completed some work on my house's wood trim, and, while the end product was good, the experience was not.

Like many home improvement projects, mine was delayed several times. And while the delays did not bother me, the lack of communication did. I did not receive timely updates unless I asked for them, and when I encountered issues, it took some time to get a response, if I received one at all.

Responsiveness and communication are top concerns of law firm clients, too, and clients will sever relationships with firms that do not meet their expectations. If a case or deal faces a setback, or a deliverable is taking longer than expected, it's critical for attorneys to proactively provide an update to the client. Clients should never have to ask about the status of a project, but if they do, it's also crucial that you respond promptly.

Tip: Ask your clients if they would like to receive regular project updates on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis, and then make sure you deliver those updates – even if the update is "nothing new to report." If something unexpected arises, communicate that change immediately.

Take Ownership and Honor the Engagement

The initial pitch for my home improvement project was impressive. The company's owner showed deep subject matter expertise, had extensive references, and easily established rapport and trust. At that meeting, he told me that he would have a crew onsite for my job each day, and that he would personally oversee the work. When it came time for the project to begin, the "crew" was just one worker, and the owner showed up only to collect payment before promptly disappearing for vacation.

In-house teams regularly complain that law firms pull out all the stops when pitching for work, only to neglect the client after the engagement letter is signed. Clients are also annoyed when firms fail to follow through on promises made in the pitch, particularly regarding staffing. Firms will often include their most impressive, and busiest lawyers, in a pitch to win the work – only to staff the matter with someone who has more availability.

Tip: Make sure your pitches and RFP responses profile those who will do the work, including associates. And then check in with clients at the conclusion of a matter, or at some other regular interval, to see if they are happy with the team or if adjustments need to be made.

Personalize the Service

Members of Troutman Pepper's Client Experience team traveled to Arizona this month for the firm's partner retreat. As we waited for our flight in the airport lounge, we noted the long line for the avocado toast station. These were some of the busiest and most experienced travelers, but they were happy to queue for the made-to-order dish, which was personalized to their tastes.

We realized these frequent fliers are much like law firm clients. They are discerning customers, but they are willing to invest more time and money into products and services customized for them. While certain clients or matters may be *similar*, no two are ever exactly *alike*, and attorneys must look to each client's unique needs when making decisions related to staffing, communication, budget, strategy, and more.

Tip: Make each client feel as if they are your only client. Ask regularly about their preferences and tailor your approach and work product to their needs. As more clients return to the office, check in to see whether preferences have changed and whether clients want increased face time with your team.

Ask for Feedback

Even if you deliver exactly what the client requested when hiring you – whether that's winning a case or closing a deal – their perception of the experience will influence whether they hire you again. That's why it's so crucial to ask for post-matter feedback, even if you anticipate that the feedback will be negative.

When my home improvement project was finished, the company's owner asked to schedule a time to pick up the last check. I asked him about a final project walkthrough, which we never had. He simply picked up payment, and that was the last I heard from him. So, when my neighbor asked if I would recommend the company for some work she needed done, I told her "no," even though I was happy with the end product.

Tip: When you reach key milestones in a matter or when a matter concludes, ask your client for a brief call for the sole purpose of gathering feedback. Ask what went well, what didn't, and what improvements you should make.

Most importantly, do not react defensively to feedback, even if you disagree with it. Ask yourself “What part of this feedback is true?” and make a plan to address it. Soliciting and responding to post-project feedback can give you one final chance to ensure your client has a positive experience that results in them hiring you again.

Meet Erin Murphy

Erin works directly with the firm ‘s clients to understand and support their goals and priorities. Through client conversations and feedback interviews, Erin uncovers unmet needs, areas for collaboration, and opportunities to improve efficiency and efficacy. She then partners with our attorneys, clients, and other administrative teams to lead projects to improve the client experience, including advising on in-house best practices, designing and launching new technology solutions, and pursuing attorney-client partnerships related to pro bono and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

