



In the News

The Art of Client Service Hasn't Changed with the Times

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(Texas Lawyer – January/February 2019) – People remember those that take the time to understand them, their business, their business's legal needs, and formulate actionable suggestions about improving their professional lives.

As a law firm leader, I have emphasized the value of good service as a fundamental characteristic of successful lawyers. This “service” mindset is a result of how I was raised. I grew up on Long Island, my father was a NY street cop and my mother an office manager. Our neighborhood was “blue collar” and we lived among other cops, firemen, carpenters, steam fitters, tinsmiths, mechanics and bartenders.

One of our neighbors, an airline mechanic, was repeatedly laid off in the mid-70s. Rather than go with another airline, he decided to lease a two-bay garage at the end of our block and open an auto-repair shop. My father usually fixed our cars himself, but he sent my mother's car to Charlie for tune-ups, oil changes and the like, trying to help Charlie get his business started—it's what neighbors did.

One day, a widow in our neighborhood asked my father about Charlie's business and if he would recommend Charlie. My father responded that “his prices are fair” and “Charlie knows what he is doing.” The widow listened and then asked “but, does he provide ‘good’ service?” My father thought for a second and responded, “Yes, Charlie will explain what's needed, and estimate a fair price. He'll be on-time with his work or call and tell you why he's running late. He also stands behind his work, no arguments.”

Sometimes, lawyers fall in love with their work product, the elegance of their brief or their perfect patent application, excluding from their process any consideration of what their client needs or expects. At the very extreme is the attorney so completely oriented to their own values and pride in their legal craftsmanship that their client's needs are placed second behind their own.

An attorney can provide excellent work product but if they don't understand the value of service, they don't understand business. The lesson is that although work product and service are not the same thing, they should go “hand in glove.”

Misunderstanding the Client's (or Prospective Client's) Expectations and Needs

In private practice, it is all too common that an attorney provides superior work product, but this is not the client's perception because his service is mediocre. A common example is when an attorney invests significant time and effort in addressing unforeseen contingencies – “going the extra mile” – but, because the client did not expect those contingencies (i.e., was not educated about them), the client is irritated by the expense (and possible delay) rather than appreciative of the attorney's expertise.

Typically, this is not an unsophisticated client unable to appreciate what is being done for them, but more commonly an attorney failing to explain recommended services and manage client expectations properly.

When a crowded restaurant “overestimates” the time for a table to become free, they will knowingly lose some patrons, but those that remain will be seated before they expected, a pleasant surprise and positive beginning to a service experience. This is now multiplied by the quality of the meal and service throughout. The result is customer satisfaction.



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Understanding How Clients Select Legal Services

The simple truth is, clients want to believe that their attorney is an advocate rather than a “necessary evil.” Attorneys young and old must endeavor to be the former rather than the latter and this is not taught in law school.

Clients purchase three types of legal services: efficiency-, experienced- and expertise-based services (there are often combinations as well). The most-common legal service is provided by efficiency-based practices, those that can meet the client's high-volume needs with a quick start, fast disposition, and low cost.

The next, most-common practice is experience-based service, where the client seeks brain power in combination with experience solving similar problems at a competitive cost.

The last and least-common practice involves a client with a substantial, complex, high-risk and unusual problem that seeks expertise; this client seeks to hire the most talented, creative and effective attorney irrespective of cost.

Whether meeting with an existing or perspective client, “preparation” should mean seizing the opportunity to demonstrate initiative. There is little that is more off putting to the purchaser of legal services than someone who asks obvious questions about the company they could have learned in advance. A good attorney will demonstrate a genuine interest in understanding the client's needs and business challenges.

Clients have the right to expect the highest level of service from their attorneys. If they are in the hospitality industry, this means their attorneys understand the importance of data security, electronic records, encryption, and training. If they are a small-cap or privately held company, this means their attorneys pride themselves on billing integrity, data security, staying current on business trends, keeping communication lines open, and interacting with the client in non-business environments to better appreciate and understand the client's world. If the client is a mature company, their attorneys will read the annual report and find ways to help in-house counsel get more value out of less dollars spent. One way this can happen, for example, is to develop a process that streamlines large volumes of patents or offer accelerated contract reviews.

Finding solutions and bringing value to the client is what makes a good attorney worth the cost. Quality legal service is as important and valuable as work product.

William A. Munck is managing partner of Munck Wilson Mandala, a technology-focused law firm headquartered in Dallas with offices in Austin and Marshall, Texas, and Los Angeles, California. Munck has more than 25 years of intellectual property law experience and he chairs the firm's IP Section, leading a team of attorneys focused on patent, trade secret, trademark and copyright procurement, IP and technology litigation and licensing.

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- William A. Munck