Law Firm Tips: 6 attorney actions that can ruin your law firm relationship with clients

The importance of the attorney-client relationship cannot be denied. First, as a lawyer, you are bound by rules governing your responsibilities to the client. Secondly, the proper delivery of legal services requires a level of trust from your clients. Finally, successful client relationships lead to profitable referrals and repeat business.

Unfortunately, many attorneys act in ways that undermine the attorney-client relationship. Even if it isn't intentional, your behavior can have a negative effect on the way your clients view you and the legal services you provide.

The following are six actions that can negatively impact your relationships with clients. If they sound familiar, you may want to make some changes before you ruin valuable client relations.

Overpromising and under-delivering

Overpromising is a common part of the business. From exaggerated sales promises to over-the-top advertisements, business owners often overpromise to get customers through the door. But these tactics can lead to a disaster down the line, as business owners find themselves unable to adequately deliver on promises made.

Attorneys are not immune from this poor judgement. You may overpromise results in order to attract new matters from the competition, but underdeliver in the long run to the dissatisfaction of the client. Like any other business, that dissatisfaction may lead to poor reviews and lost referrals. But within the legal profession, it can also lead to bar complaints and sanctions.

Avoiding the pitfalls of overpromising and under delivering requires honesty and reliability. Here are some tips for avoiding this legal problem:

- Set clear expectations from the start – The intake interview provides an opportunity for setting clear expectations with the client.
- Give a disclaimer – If you cannot promise a particular outcome, why not make that clear to the client?
- Be realistic with the client – Give a realistic view of the case. Don't try to sugarcoat the challenges of the matter to make yourself look better in the client's view.
- Be realistic with yourself – Are you realistic about your own capabilities? It's important to be just as honest with yourself as you are with your client. If you are unsure about your own ability to successfully handle the matter, proceed appropriately.

Lack of communication

Failure to communicate with clients is often cited as the number one reason for bar complaints against attorneys. Lawyers are notorious for not returning telephone calls or emails. Clients spend their hard-earned dollars to secure your services. In return, they want to know that adequate work is being done on their behalf. When they don't hear from you, they assume that you aren't working.

You can promote effective communication by returning calls and messages on a regular basis. Delegate what you can to support staff and set aside a particular time each day to handle calls you need to make personally. That way, you won't feel overwhelmed with client communications throughout the day.

Another way to handle client communications is with a client portal. TimeSolv legal billing software includes a portal feature that allows clients to independently log into their individual accounts to view bills, notes, and progress on their respective cases.

Overbilling

One of the quickest ways to undermine an attorney-client relationship is by overcharging. When clients receive an inflated bill, they begin to question

your professionalism, as well as your ethics. Even if it occurred mistakenly – as an administrative error or oversight – the damage is done from the minute the client questions the legitimacy of the invoice.

Fortunately, there are some steps you can take to avoid overbilling clients and the problems that can result:

- Track time accurately. Implement a system that allows you to track all time efficiently and accurately.
- Create a standard billing procedure. By consistently handling the invoicing process in the same manner every time, you also lower the opportunity for human errors – regardless of who handles the task.
- Utilize a trusted electronic billing software. The right platform makes the billing process seamless and easy to complete. TimeSolv legal billing makes invoicing faster and easier for your entire staff.

Failing to admit mistakes

Everyone makes mistakes, even attorneys. Yet, lawyers seem to be particularly bad at admitting their errors, which may negatively impact relationships with your clients. Mistakes tend to come out in the open one way or another. When clients find out about your errors from someone other than you, they start to questions your professionalism and their trust in your services.

To counter this problem, first ask yourself why you cannot admit your mistakes. Fear usually has something to do with it. The legal profession is extremely competitive, and lawyers do not want to admit mistakes for fear of looking bad in the eyes of other lawyers. They may also fear that the client will choose to work with another firm.

Embarrassment can also contribute to the failure to admit mistakes. No one likes to admit their shortcomings, but it is even more difficult to admit that you tried and failed. Your position of expertise in the attorney-client relationship may make you feel embarrassed about your mistake.

Building client trust involves admitting that you are human who makes mistakes. Taking responsibility will likely result in a better outcome than keeping your mistakes a secret.

Procrastination

Procrastination is a rampant issue within the legal community. Whether it's the overload of responsibilities or a fear of failure, many attorneys report procrastination among their common challenges.

Psychology Today provides these tips for avoiding procrastination:

- Focus on the "why" – Procrastination provides a short-term gain of not immediately handling a task, but it does not give you any long-term accomplishment. Place your focus on the long-term goal of finishing the task, so you can get it off of your mind and move on to something else.
- Break it into manageable chunks. An overwhelming project may be easier to digest if you break it down into smaller pieces. Handling individual tasks can help you feel less overwhelmed and more empowered.
- Get rid of the excuses. People often create excuses not to do the things they don't want to do. Recognize excuses for what they are and put them to the side.

Don't let these habits ruin your attorney-client relationships. Take the necessary steps to address these actions so your practice can cultivate successful and profitable relations with each and every client.

About Erika Winston:

Erika Winston is a freelance writer with a passion for law. Through her business, Personal Touch Edits, she helps legal professionals deliver effective written messages. Erika is a regular contributor to TimeSolv and a variety of other publications.