The Difficult Client

I've heard many attorneys say that the best part of practicing law is working with clients and the worst part of practicing law is working with clients. As with any service-based industry, many practice areas of law require substantial communications with the public. While the vast majority of these relationships are positive, there is always that one client whose presence leaves you with a headache. Whether it is the overly aggressive business owner or the weepy divorcee, there is no practice without clients, so it's best to learn how to deal with these challenging individuals.

Tips from the ABA

An American Bar Association (ABA) article provides useful tips for dealing with difficult clients. The article first suggests that you establish your role as a legal advisor. Some clients resist taking responsibility for any decisions about their cases. They would rather defer every choice to you. As explained in the ABA article, this is not your responsibility. Though you provide guidance and advice about available choices and possible solutions, it is the job of the client to ultimately make decisions. Ensure that you communicate these roles to prevent problems.

This course of action leads into another ABA suggestion. It's important to manage a client's expectations early in the attorney-client relationship. Individuals often seek legal representation when something has gone wrong in their lives. They are in vulnerable situations and they want an attorney to make everything okay. This can lead to unreasonable expectations, disappointments and angry, difficult clients. The Bar article advises that you discuss the client's expectations at the outset of representation. Be open and honest about the expectations you can meet and the ones you cannot.

Get it in writing

A third tip is to document, document and document some more. I'm an optimist. I like to believe the best about people. However, when conflicts arise, individuals tend to look out for their own well being. Having expectations and agreements in writing supports your position if a dispute arises. The ABA article suggests that you document telephone calls, emails, voice mail messages – all communications between the client and your law office.

Clients are customers too

Since legal clients are also customers, it's useful to consider some general tips for handling challenging customers. Here are some of those tips:

- Listen carefully to concerns and complaints.
- Repeat back what you hear for clarification.
- Respond calmly and authoritatively.
- Don't take it personal. Remember, misery loves company.

Difficult clients come with the territory. With some proactive measures and tips from the ABA, you can successfully handle these challenges with a superior level of professionalism.

About Erika Winston:

Erika Winston is a Virginia based writer with a passion for all things legal. As a former domestic relations attorney, she understands the challenge of determining the best fee structure for your practice. Erika is a regular contributor to TimeSolv and a variety of other publications.