

Tips for improving your attorney-client relationships

Client relationships are the cornerstone of a legal practice. Positive experiences lead to repeat business, client referrals, and a good reputation for your firm. Negative relationships can result in poor reviews, disgruntled clients, and even Bar complaints. Particularly in this age of social media and online reviews, it is imperative that you consider the state of your attorney-client relationships and take measures to improve them when necessary. The following are some tips on strengthening your client associations. While some of them may seem like common sense, they all stem from common complaints about the legal profession.

Honesty

Unfortunately, honesty is not a word that is often used to describe the legal community. Whether justified or not, the profession's general reputation often falls short of complimentary. Fight against this negative view by always being honest with your clients... and I'm not only talking about obvious deceptions, I'm also referring to those seamlessly harmless little white lies.

For example, a client with a less than stellar case walks in the door. You know it's likely a losing matter, but you need the large fee that it will bring. Instead of being honest with this potential client about their case, you play down the weaknesses in order to collect the fee. What's going to happen when you start running into roadblock after roadblock in the representation of this case? How will your client feel when he or she eventually learns that it was a weak case from the beginning? Clients appreciate honest assessments and complete disclosure throughout the case. It builds trust

and confidence in your legal abilities, which strengthens the attorney-client relationship.

Communicate, communicate, communicate

One of the most common complaints against attorneys is lack of communication. Clients do not like unreturned calls and unanswered emails. I know you probably receive numerous calls in a single day, but it's still important to develop a system for communicating with your clients and keeping them up to date on the progression of their cases. You can accomplish this goal in a number of ways:

- Establish a set time each day to return calls and emails – Instead of taking calls and answering emails throughout the day, designate a specific time to tackle this task. You may decide to do it first thing in the morning or during the final hour of your day, but having a set time helps to organize your messages and gives you a better system for ensuring that client questions get answered.
- Train your support staff to recognize what assistance they can offer inquiring clients – They are there to support you and call screening is of major assistance. While there are definitely some questions that require your professional advisement, I am willing to bet that a large portion of them center on scheduling, billing, or some other administrative issue. Why not let your support staff deal with these responses? Your client will be satisfied, even while you continue working on more substantive tasks.
- Send regular, adequately detailed billing statements – Regular billing statements are an effective and efficient manner of communicating with your clients. By including reasonably detailed information about tasks completed on their case, clients can see for themselves what has been accomplished. Not to mention, timely payment for your legal services. Winning!

Professionals, not friends

You may meet some incredible people while practicing law, but according to a blog post on the [DC Bar](#) website, it's important to respect the line between client and friend. While there may not be rules prohibiting friendships between lawyers and their clients, these types of relationships can quickly become challenging to navigate. As explained in the blog post, "the core duties of a lawyer run to the client entity, not the representative. Taking the relationship too far can become awkward, if not problematic. Be collegial, but don't suggest vacationing together."

By conducting yourself in a professional manner when interacting with clients, you establish a more effective agency relationship. Remember, proper representation requires you to ask, "What would a good attorney do" not "What would a good friend do".

A person, not a paycheck

When your financial well-being depends on the number of hours you spend working on cases, it can be easy to start seeing clients as paychecks instead of people. This is one of the worst mistakes any business professional can make because it takes the emphasis away from customer service. Never forget that your clients come to you in the midst of some of the most challenging times of their lives. Whether they are stressing over a major business deal, facing a messy divorce, or trying to stay out of jail, your clients need to feel that you are compassionate about their case and not just using them to pay the electricity bill and buy a new car.

Get feedback

Have you noticed that the bottom of almost every store receipt includes an online survey request? That's because corporate America recognizes the benefit of customer feedback. An honest assessment is extremely valuable in identifying what your practice is doing right and where improvements could be made. Ask for client feedback at the end of a case matter, or you don't even have to wait for the end of your representation. How about occasionally asking for client feedback throughout the case? That way, any

dissatisfaction can be addressed immediately before it interferes with the case or your attorney-client relationship. You can also try sending questionnaires by mail or email. For truly honest answers, it's probably best to use the services of a third party. Websites like **** or **** help you construct online surveys that clients can answer anonymously.

Use the valuable information you receive to identify areas for improvement of your attorney-client relationships. Was the client dissatisfied with your frequency of communication? Perhaps you will find some complaints regarding the professionalism of your support staff. While you may not be able to make every client 100% satisfied, issues that pop up repeatedly mean that there is probably a problem that needs to be addressed.

These are just a few tips, but the attorney-client relationship should be taken very seriously. Take the temperature of your client associations and don't hesitate to make changes when needed. A little effort will have your practice brimming with happy clients and a stellar reputation.

About Erika Winston:

Erika Winston is a freelance writer with a passion for law. Through her business, The Legal Writing Studio, she helps legal professionals deliver effective written messages. Erika is a regular contributor to [TimeSolv](#) and a variety of other publications.