

Rainmaking

Nurturing Clients to Grow Your Practice

SUSAN SALTONSTALL DUNCAN | Providing satisfactory service and achieving results are essential to earning client respect. But they are rarely sufficient to win client loyalty and repeat business for the long term. That kind of payoff requires a greater investment.

Lawyers who have long-standing and profitable relationships with clients do much to nurture relationships, engender trust and bind clients to them. In essence, they become advisers to their clients, providing much more value than merely an expert knowledge of the law. There are a number of tangible ways you can deepen and expand your relationships with clients to add stability and profitability to your practice. Let's consider some of the most important ones.

Become an Avid Listener

Lawyers tend to want to convince others of their wealth of knowledge or their point of view. Instead, you should be focusing on your clients' needs, interests and questions. This means becoming an active listener, while also eliciting information that will help you better serve the client.

If, for example, you provide personal services to clients, such as in



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divorce, criminal or workers' compensation matters, be sure you gain an understanding of the client's employment and personal situations. Similarly, if you are helping a client with business matters, be sure to ask specific questions about the client's business, eliciting information that may affect what you are doing for the client or about which someone else in your firm may offer some advice. As your service relationship with the client progresses, you can begin to ask questions that may open the door to serving other legal needs, such as in the areas of real estate, family law, or trusts and estates. To the extent that you or someone else in your firm is not qualified to handle these matters, you want to establish a good working relationship with one or two other lawyers to whom you can comfortably refer the client.

Asking questions and deepening your understanding of the client's issues and needs will enable you to be more responsive, more personal and more aware of additional service opportunities.

Add a Personal Dimension

People like to work with people with whom they have chemistry and share

some common interests. Finding areas of connection with clients, beyond the matter or service they have come to you for, will strengthen the relationship and make it easier to address challenges or problems as the representation moves forward. Getting to know clients better, while showing concern for and interest in them, also opens the door to a more mutually respectful relationship.

Try to identify areas in which you share a mutual interest with the client. It may be a hobby, a sports team, a civic, charitable or political organization, children or an alma mater. Keep track of those interests, and also of important activities and dates—such as birthdays, wedding anniversaries and other special occasions—in your contact database and on your calendar. Make a call or write a note on each special day.

Stay in Touch and Show Your Appreciation

Given the amount of information overload that everyone is exposed to, it is very easy for clients to forget about you if you do not keep yourself on their radar screens. You or someone on your team should be in touch with active clients on an ongoing basis to keep them informed about the status of their matters. But even for clients who do not have an open or active matter, communicate in some way at least once a quarter. Find ways to stay in contact if you want them to return to you for additional services.

Whether you should entertain a client will depend very much on the nature of the relationship, the client's personality and the volume of your client base.

With clients for whom you do small matters on a transactional basis, it may not be appropriate (or time-effective) to extend the relationship to a more personal level. Most one-on-one entertainment is only appropriate for clients with whom you have business relationships and who you represent in non-personal matters. Taking them to lunch, a performance or a sporting event can provide an ideal opportunity to deepen a client relationship and to express appreciation. Other ways to do so on a broader scale include sending holiday cards (with a handwritten note) or sending holiday gifts to key clients, preferably something of meaning to them.

In addition, consider hosting a reception or social event to bring clients together and express your appreciation for their business. You might also offer a short seminar on a legal, business or personal planning topic where someone in your firm speaks or you bring in a non-lawyer expert to present. Other ideas include hosting a community law day or a career event that focuses on children or students.

Add Value in Other Ways

Clients like to know that you're staying alert about items of interest to them, and a good way to convey that is to send out mailings or e-alerts with relevant information or news. Topics might include an announcement about a new attorney in the firm with expertise the client may need, an article pertaining to the client's business issues, an alert about

a new law, or a newsletter with tips on legal or personal strategies.

There are, of course, other ways in which you can expand relationships with clients, earn their appreciation and loyalty, and set yourself apart from other lawyers. Take your business clients to important political, civic or business events and look for opportunities to introduce them to individuals who could be helpful to them, such as a banker, a political contact or a potential business partner or employee. Find ways to help clients with personal needs, too, such as recommending a local school, finding a realtor, or offering input on colleges or careers.

Also, consider developing an internal "Yellow Pages" directory that lists clients' businesses or services so your own lawyers and staff can patronize clients or refer others to them.

Increase Business from Existing Clients

Once you know that clients are extremely satisfied with your services, you may then seek additional opportunities to get more business from those clients.

Ask clients with whom you have ongoing and positive relationships to introduce you to their colleagues and friends and to make referrals. (Remember not to appear or imply that you are too busy all the time.) Also, be sure to devise a program to formally thank them whenever they refer new business your way.

When you get word that someone in the client's company has received a promotion, write a note of congratulations. Identify new, upcoming leaders in your clients' companies and introduce yourself to them. If your contacts leave a company and go to

competitor companies, track them and keep in touch.

And stay fully knowledgeable about your own firm's resources, capabilities and staff so you know who to call for what and can easily make referrals to others in the firm when your client needs their services. Invite clients to the firm's offices and give them a tour, introducing them to at least two other lawyers with different areas of expertise.

The Trusted Counselor's Role

Ultimately, there are lawyers who are perceived more as vendors than as personal advisers. Unfortunately, vendors do not always engender loyalty—their clients more often look to them for a good product at the best price. The lowest bidder who can deliver something on time gets the work.

Professional advisers, on the other hand, tend to have a deeper understanding of client needs and are relied on as trusted counselors. Nurturing clients for whom you can provide ongoing and expanding services brings greater rewards to you, your clients and your firm in the long term. It is well worth the extra investment of your effort and time. ^{1P}

Resource

- **The Lawyer's Guide to Marketing Your Practice**, 2nd Edition, edited by James A. Durham and Deborah McMurray. Thirteen chapters are now online for immediate download. Select from chapters on client feedback, Weblogs, public speaking, Internet marketing and more, at www.abanet.org/lpm/publications.shtml.