Building client relationships

By Louis Rood

Become your client’s trusted adviser does not happen overnight. It is a step-by-step process, and it can be an uphill battle. How do you go about climbing this steep and often slippery slope? By using a ‘ladder’.

The following process illustrates how a client can be attracted to a law firm, so that the client eventually decides to make use of its services. There are eight rungs to this ‘ladder’:

• Awareness. The potential client gets to know that your firm exists. He or she hears about it or reads about it.
• Knowledge. The client learns something about the firm, where it is, what it does and who the people who work there are.
• Liking. The client finds your firm attractive, appealing and is interested in knowing more about it.
• Preference. The client decides that your firm is better than other firms, that it suits his or her needs, and that he or she would like to use it. It is like selecting an item for dinner from a menu: The client decides what he or she prefers over everything else on offer, based on content, appeal and price.
• Connection. The client makes contact with your firm and you react, respond and interact.
• Purchase. The client gives your firm an instruction – he or she buys the legal services you offer.
• Comfort. The client is happy with the services he or she has bought from your firm and feels good and relaxed about dealing with your firm. He or she has confidence in you, trusts you and finds you reliable and more instructive.
• Advocacy. This is where your client becomes your firm’s agent. By word of mouth he or she does your marketing for you, telling others how good you are, how happy and satisfied he or she is with your firm and recommends your services to others.

You are now at the top of the ‘ladder’ and can pick the ripe fruit. The flip side is where you neglect the client, become complacent, take the client for granted, and let your standards slip. The client becomes disillusioned, dissatisfied and feels let down. The client slowly slides down the ‘ladder’ and eventually departs, leaving you high and dry. That is the end of the relationship – it can and does happen, but you should never allow it to happen.

Focus on the client

Many law firms become overly consumed by their internal dynamics – remuneration systems, managing difficult personalities, recruitment and training, regulatory compliance, budgetary demands – and all too easily take their eyes off the ball: The all-important client.

The task of an attorney, first and foremost, is to serve the interests of the client. It is the best way to ensure that your own interests are served. What does the client expect?

The answer is reliable, professional, high-quality service delivering solutions. How can you not only meet but exceed those expectations and do so consistently? You have to constantly strive to improve every aspect of service every day.

Your benchmark should not be what your competitors are doing. Your benchmark should be yourself. How can you improve on how you have previously performed? How can you be the best you can be? And then go one better.

Self-audit

At the end of each year it is a good idea for you to conduct some self-assessment and evaluate your own performance so that you have a clear vision of how you want to approach the following year. There are three issues you can evaluate:

• Reputation gains. Determine in which areas of your practice you have made significant improvements and how can you use these advances to your further advantage, for greater rewards, better insights, and heightened performance.
• Reputation neutrality. These are areas where you have remained constant. That means you have been consistent, but perhaps stagnated: You may have maintained standards, but have not improved on them. If you keep to this approach, expect similar returns.
• Reputation deficit. You win some, you lose some, but in the game of life significant losses suggest deficiencies. These are areas where you have slipped up, failed to perform to your potential and lost ground. It may be because things have changed, and you have failed to adapt. Be honest with yourself, identify the areas where there are room for improvement and map out a plan of how you intend turning things around for the better.

It is all about taking charge of your own life and practice, the role you would like to play and how you manage your tasks and challenges, rather than plodding on waiting for something to happen, or for someone else to determine your destiny. The best kind of empowerment is self-empowerment.

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