

7 STEPS to Client Loyalty

BY MICAH SOLOMON

Creating true client loyalty is the fastest, most reliable way to build a strategic, sustainable advantage in a modern legal practice. Truly loyal clients are less price sensitive, more willing to forgive your small foibles, and, most important, almost completely immune to competitive entreaties from the firm across the street or across the continent. The seven tips outlined here will set you on your way to building the kind of client loyalty you can put in the bank.

STEP 1

Remember and acknowledge each client in a way that is personal to him or her.

Loyalty is not built on the tradition of standing ready to besiege clients with mailings sent out in a *pro forma* fashion about the other services your firm can provide. Loyalty is built by treating every client as unique. Law firms thrive once they dedicate themselves to achieving the effectiveness of a beloved bartender, doorman, or hairstylist — the kind who would know a client's preferences, the name of the client's pet, and when the client was in last. Loyalty is built, for example, by knowing that your client has a sibling with severe medical problems, and, after reading online about a new case that could help, forwarding the link and offering to find an expert — even if the expert is not in your own firm.

STEP 3

Every hello and goodbye must be perfect.

Psychological studies reveal that clients remember the first and last minutes of a service encounter much more vividly, and for much longer, than the rest of a meeting. Do your attorneys or support staff sound interrupted when a client calls, or do they sound genuinely pleased to hear from the client? Do you screen calls unnecessarily or cold-transfer people? At the end of a project, is the last thing your client receives from you a chilly statement by mail, or do you make an attempt to offer a proper farewell, including thanks and an invitation to return if anything else is needed? Make sure that the first and final elements of your client interactions are particularly well-engineered, because they are going to stick in your client's memory.

STEP 2

Faster service wins the day.

Clients don't know what is involved in completing your work — and modern clients expect speedier service than previous generations. They figure their requests can be taken care of as automatically and as quickly as fulfilling an order for cufflinks on Amazon.com. If a contract draft is going to take you four days to deliver, respond to the client immediately to explain the length of time you are going to need. Then dig in to the actual work.

STEP 4

Shelve your legal skills when it comes to resolving service issues for clients. A courtroom approach only gets in the way.

Resolving client-service issues means knowing how to apologize for service lapses pointed out to you by a client, such as billing errors and untimely or incomplete day-to-day client care. When confronted by a client upset with what he or she perceives to be a client-service gaffe, never take a "Let's sort out the facts here and allocate responsibility" attitude. Instead, immediately, and with empathy, see your client's side in these situations, regardless of where you think the rational allocation of blame should lay. Spread this approach throughout your staff through role-playing and other training devices, so it will serve you fully every time a client is upset.

STEP 5

Pricing must be appropriate and appropriately presented.

Clients notice if your minimum rate for proofreading documents is an astonishingly high figure. Find a way to reduce the price, for example, by using paralegals or trained secretaries. You'll make up the difference easily in retained clients and referrals. Don't bill for large amounts of unexplained copying or other generic-sounding charges, and explain such charges and how they assist your client. And for Pete's sake, don't charge for that Starbucks latte you would have bought anyway.

Meeting the client's wishes before they are expressed sends the message that you truly care about your client. That cared-for feeling will generate fierce loyalty.

STEP 6

If you truly want to glue clients to your firm, learn to anticipate client needs, even before they are expressed.

When a client's wish is met before the wish has been expressed, it sends the message that you care about the client as an individual. This may seem like it requires telepathic ability, but it is achieved by simply paying attention to and knowing your clients. It's well worth the effort. The cared-for feeling a client gets when his or her wishes are anticipated will generate fierce loyalty.

To be able to anticipate what your clients want before they ask for it requires aligning your people and your systems. Hire support staff and attorneys based on a few key client-friendly traits, such as warmth, empathy, a bias toward teamwork, conscientiousness, and optimism. Align your systems to center on what clients really want from your processes, and never, ever, think you can treat everyone the same. Great service requires custom fitting — every day, hour, and minute you interact with clients at your firm.

STEP 7

Don't assume you can build client loyalty by benchmarking your service solely against the prevailing standards at other law firms. Doing so is likely setting the bar too low.

Benchmark yourself against best-in-class service-intensive businesses, because that's what your clients will do. Every client interaction is judged on expectations set by the best players in hospitality, financial services, and other enterprises where experts have made customer service a science. Measuring yourselves against these players outside the legal services industry is a great way to raise your game.



MICAH SOLOMON

is a presenter and adviser to corporations and professional firms on client service and the customer experience. For more information, visit customerserviceguru.com.

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