

## Guest Commentary: Good waiters make good lawyers

by S.C. Lawyers Weekly staff

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Law firm managing partners are talent agents. They spend most of their day managing the talent they have and recruiting new talent.

In my time in law firm management, I was constantly trying to create a template for a successful lawyer, and for me "successful" meant those who create, develop and nurture long-term client relationships. A strong understanding of the law itself was a baseline requirement, but not in any way a determinant of success. After all, how many really "good" lawyers can you think of who are not successful?

The problem with my template is that I kept having to revise it. The only thing I learned by looking at grades was that those with the very best grades were often not successful; there are exceptions. Work experience prior to law school was about 50/50 in determining success as was military service. I was never able to ink or set my template in stone.

So there may not be a template, but there is a "type." That "type" is what I call the "good waiter." Those lawyers who were once good waiters or at least thought like good waiters (or waitresses) were successful in private practice.

First, to understand why good waiters make good lawyers, is a recognition that any successful lawyer must embrace that they are part of the service industry and that service is the key to their success and their firm's success. Sounds simple, but the constant theme with unsuccessful, yet very smart, lawyers as well as those who get sued by their clients is a failure of service. Second, successful lawyers understand that good service can enhance delivery of the legal product just as easily as bad service can detract from the delivery of the legal product.

Think about what it is like to go to a super restaurant with great food and have a horrible waiter. Are you likely to go back, recommend the restaurant to friends? Or, at best, do you say "food was great, but the service stunk"? Now, change out the bad waiter with a lawyer who does not return phone calls, misses deadlines and generally wastes the time of the client.

The really successful lawyers are not only not like a bad waiter, they are like good waiters. Consider these traits of a good waiter:

1. A good waiter finds the right mix of being there, but not being there too much;
2. A good waiter anticipates what a table wants before the table asks for it;
3. A good waiter understands what a table wants ("Are you in a hurry?") and clearly communicates what can be delivered and deals with the reality ("We are backed up, dinner will be in another 20 minutes, can I bring you another drink?")
4. Most importantly, a good waiter treats every table as if that table is its most important table - ever. No table wants to hear how busy you are with other tables.

Service will never compensate for bad lawyering. Good lawyering, be it transactional or litigation, is a must.

What good service does is it translates good lawyering into successful lawyering. Lawyering that consistently creates, develops and nurtures long-term client relationships. While doing a good job brings each of us a great deal of satisfaction, developing long-term, meaningful relationships with our clients not only brings us even greater levels of satisfaction as lawyers, but will bring us

personally, and our firms generally, greater financial stability and success.

**Editor's note:** *Lord is a member at Nexsen Pruet in Columbia. He served as the firm's chairman of the board from 2006 until 2010. His practice is focused in the areas of economic development, corporate, partnership and real estate law with a special emphasis on economic development and real estate financing, commercial leasing and state land sale registrations.*

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