

Legal Management

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To Market

TODAY'S BEST MARKETING PRACTICE? SOLICIT AND RESPOND TO CLIENT FEEDBACK

By John L. Remsen, Jr.

Often, I am asked my opinion about the single most effective marketing strategy a law firm can implement. And the more involved I become in the business of marketing legal services, the more certain I am in my reply. Without exception, the answer is, "Ask your clients for feedback and respond to what they say." It's just that simple.

Why do I feel so strongly? Well, consider the following....

- Soliciting and responding to client feedback works for law firms of all types and sizes - from a sole practitioner struggling to establish a personal injury practice to a large, commercial firm with multi-office locations
- It focuses *directly* on existing clients who are by far your firm's number one source of future business, no matter what kind of law your firm practices.

If your law firm has a consumer-oriented practice, consider the findings of a 1997 study conducted for The Florida Bar on how people find and choose their lawyers. It found that 3 in 4 individuals found his/her lawyer through the recommendation of a friend or relative. In most cases, that friend or relative refers an attorney with whom he/she had a positive prior experience.

If your firm has a commercial practice, chances are that over 85% of next year's business will come directly from current clients. Current clients will also refer about half of next year's new clients.

- Client feedback programs can be implemented in a wide variety of ways - from a casual, laid-back approach to a very in-depth, formal methodology. We'll discuss some of them later in the article.
- They can be introduced and conducted at the firm, practice group, and/or individual attorney level and methodologies can be blended together so that clients are able to provide feedback in several ways.
- Most important of all, soliciting and responding to client feedback will make your firm's lawyers and staff much more focused on client satisfaction and client loyalty.

Many firms mistakenly assume that clients will automatically speak up when they've got a complaint. Not so. All too often, the client just goes away without saying a word. I'm sure you can think of at least one example where that may have happened recently at your law firm.

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Therefore, it is critical to ask clients for their feedback. In so doing, you will begin to create a rapport with clients that makes them feel comfortable to raise valid concerns and constructive criticism. It gives the firm the opportunity to improve client satisfaction and build stronger and more loyal client relationships in the long term.

By the way, study after study tells us that clients (both sophisticated and unsophisticated) evaluate the quality of the legal services they receive in terms of service-related criteria, not quality work product.... another strong reason why your firm should be listening to what your clients have to say. It shows you care.

Introducing a Client Feedback Program at Your Firm

The key to introducing a client feedback program is to find the right approach that will work for your firm - given its practice, its goals, and its unique firm culture.

I have outlined below the types of client feedback programs that I often recommend, starting with the more formal and in-depth approaches. Think about which one might work at your firm. If you already have a client feedback program, there might be additional ways to let clients know that you care about what they think.

In-person Client Surveys

A series of formal, face-to-face meetings with clients conducted by an experienced, independent third party. The information gathered is rich in content and it's astounding how candid clients can be when talking to an outsider. Best for large (in terms of revenue to the firm), sophisticated clients who use lots of legal services.

Client Satisfaction Surveys

A mass-mailed questionnaire to a representative sample of clients. Good to gather information on a discrete topic, but might be perceived as impersonal to your most important clients. For higher response rates, use a short questionnaire and include a self-addressed stamped envelope.

Post Engagement Questionnaires

Sent at the conclusion of a matter, post engagement questionnaires are both client and matter specific. Particularly good for consumer-oriented law firms. Here again, keep the questionnaire short, with a mix of open-ended and "rate us on a 1-10 scale"-type questions.

Client Site Visits

Best for ongoing business clients, this program involves lawyers visiting clients at their places of business. The lawyer should be clear on the purpose of his/her visit. Objectives might include learning more about the client's business, thanking the client for previous work and showing that you genuinely care. Extremely effective and very natural for the profession's best rainmakers.

Informal Attorney/Client Interactions

These can happen almost anywhere.... over lunch, at the conclusion of a business meeting or on the golf course. The point is for the lawyer to ask, "How are we doing?" Or, better yet, "Is there anything we can do to make your life easier?" And then, respond as appropriate.

Of course, there are dozens of variations of these types of client feedback programs. Blend them together. Just make certain that the firm is doing something to routinely gather important information on how well it provides its services to clients.

A Few Words of Caution

Give careful consideration regarding who within the firm can see the results of any written clients surveys, especially those that are client and/or matter specific. Lawyers get awfully nervous if they think there is a chance that others within the firm may see a bad report card from an important client. Also, think deliberately about the survey methodologies you think will be most successful at your firm. Not all lawyers will react favorably to the idea of soliciting client feedback, so you will want to introduce approaches that will have high probabilities of success. We recommend that you hire an experienced marketing consultant who has successfully conducted client feedback programs to help design and introduce an optimal program for your firm.

Lastly, we cannot overemphasize the importance of *responding* to what clients are telling you. If the firm and its lawyers ask for client feedback and are not willing or prepared to act on what they learn, it's better not to ask at all.

Conclusion

Clearly, soliciting and responding to client feedback is the single most cost-effective marketing strategy a law firm can implement. To improve the way your firm goes about the process, think about the various methods presented this short article. I predict that you are likely to conclude that a more formal and systematic approach is something your firm should do. Go for it! You'll be glad you did.

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About the Author

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