

Small Firms and Solos are Delivering Giant-Sized Client Service



by Stacy Clark

Imagine having a physician who never keeps you waiting, returns your phone calls right away, gives you his or her home phone number to call if you don't feel well after office hours and e-mails you regularly with news about specific new medical advances that might affect you — all without being asked to do so!

This is exactly the kind of service some small firms today are delivering to their clients. In today's high-tech, 24-hour, non-stop world, solo practitioners and small firms are coming up with extraordinarily clever ways of providing their clients with exceptional legal work *and* service.

What Is Exceptional Client Service?

Exceptional client service can take many forms and includes outstanding:

- Responsiveness/accessibility;
- Communication about the status of a case;
- Understanding of a client's needs and business; and what I call,
- The “putting yourself in the client's shoes” factor.

Here are some examples of the kinds of exceptional service small firms and solos are delivering in each of these categories.

Responsiveness

How fast do you return phone calls? Chicago's Laner Muchin, a 40-lawyer labor and employment firm has given clients a guarantee — “Every phone call returned within two hours. No exceptions.” The firm developed a brochure, an advertising campaign and a public relations and internal training program around those words. They even hired a professional actor to secretly phone lawyers to test them on whether they were actually returning calls within the stated time. Everyone did.

The firm calls the program an unqualified success. It has generated new business from existing and new clients. According to Marketing Partner Joe Yastrow, lawyers are

“ratcheting up their responsiveness. One lawyer returned a client's call while undergoing an emergency root canal. A public company saw the “2-hour Guarantee” brochure and hired us to help them develop a similar training program and commitment for their customers”.

Accessibility

Many lawyers today are wearing beepers and carrying cell phones, blackberries and similar equipment to be accessible to clients around the clock. The Colorado firm of Orten & Hindman created a service called “A-Pal” (Attorney Pager Availability Line). Since the firm's clients are mainly homeowner and condominium associations whose board meetings are held in the evening, the “on-call” attorney can be paged by board members and managers while they are at those meetings. The firm also provides lawyers with Treo phones (PDA cell phones with e-mail access) *for free*.

Communication About the Case

The appellate boutique of Dunn Koes LLP provides its clients with up-to-the-minute status on pending appeals. All a client has to do is go to the firm's Web page (www.dunnkoes.com), click the pending matters page and then click on the appropriate case. The appellate court docket appears, and the client can see if anything happened that day or the day before. As Pamela Dunn explains, that saves the client a phone call — and provides the client with information 24-7. “Our clients like it, *and we like it* when we can provide our clients with a special service to efficiently get information about their cases.”

Understanding the Client's Needs and Business

Many attorneys are imbuing themselves in their clients' industries — learning everything they can about their businesses. In this regard, lawyers are accompanying clients to nonlegal-industry conferences. In the last year, Baton Rouge solo practitioner Stephen Babcock (www.babcockfirm.com) has accompanied his clients to construction and insurance seminars in Las Vegas, and this year he plans to attend similar ones in Mexico, New Orleans and, again, Las Vegas.

Many lawyers are setting up blogs to keep their clients informed about major changes or developments in the law that may affect their businesses. B. Janell Grenier, a solo practitioner in Philadelphia, provides daily posts to her blog “Benefitsblog — A tax, benefits and ERISA law commentary and news filter.” She reports that it has been an outstanding client service *and* branding tool and that she has been getting over 2,500 hits a day.

The “Putting Yourself in the Client’s Shoes” Factor

This is really where we see the most innovation. Outstanding client service in this area takes the form of a lawyer actually putting him or herself in the client’s head to know what would help the client’s business and/or personal/professional life *the most*. Examples abound — from the simple exercise of sending a client a birthday or anniversary card to helping the client get new business.

Stephen Babcock invites his clients to bring *their* clients to firm-sponsored golf or sporting events. He says “this really solidifies the relationships we have with our clients — because they see us as helping them grow *their* businesses.”

Another example comes out of Raleigh, N.C., from the 26-lawyer firm of Smith Debnam Narron Wyche Saintsing & Myers, LLP. This firm represents credit unions and for several years has been offering its clients a special service. Senior Partner Frank Drake travels to his clients’ branches and helps the credit union’s members prepare their wills, power of attorneys and living wills — right at the bank. As Director of Administration Brian Gilman explains, “The credit unions appreciate this program because it brings members into their facility and allows them to provide a unique service that can save their members the time and energy of having to go out and find a lawyer to perform this service. The firm believes strongly in helping clients help their clients. This program is an example of how we do that.”

Solo practitioners and small firms are coming up with extraordinarily clever ways of providing their clients with exceptional legal work *and* service.

If you were hiring a firm to represent you in construction defect matters, what kind of extraordinary service could you expect to receive? The California-based The Miller Law Firm Web site (www.constructiondefects.com) spells out the due diligence work it will perform for FREE — within the first 60 days of being hired by a client. Its clients are usually homeowner associations. The due diligence review includes meetings with the board of directors, a survey of all homeowners to ascertain defects, site visits with experts and more.

The Orten & Hindman firm reports that it does a number of things to enhance and build client relationships *and* deliver exceptional service. A complaint tracking and response system is in place, “scholarships” are issued for clients to attend industry conferences and seminars, a CEO monthly lunch program is held with the CEOs of the major property management

companies to discuss industry and company trends and a Q&A section of the firm’s monthly e-newsletter is dedicated to answering key industry concerns. Finally, the firm has established “office hours” on-site at property management companies — where Orten attorneys are available at scheduled times to answer the legal questions of the property managers who work there.

Tools to Improve Client Service

Every firm has some “free” tools at its disposal to deliver outstanding client service. They include:

- **Use of Support Staff.** Savvy firms today involve their staff in all levels of client service. This includes ensuring that the secretary, paralegal and others involved with clients know what the cases are about, know the principal contacts’ names and always greet them by name when they call or visit the office. Staff support should be enlisted in calendaring clients’ birthdays, graduations, anniversaries and other personal events. Moreover, your staff should be asked for *their* ideas on how client service can be improved. At one firm where I did this, the secretaries had several excellent ideas on how the phones could be answered more promptly and routed to the proper lawyers.

Use of Client Interview. Another tool of client service is the client interview. I advise all of my clients to interview their clients at the conclusion of a matter (or at least annually) to communicate how much the client’s business meant to them and to ascertain their level of satisfaction with the representation. During the client interview, I always ask the client how the firm’s service can be improved. Not only do we get great feedback and ideas from the clients, but we also communicate how much we care about delivering exceptional service.

These examples illustrate that firms are thinking outside of the box to exceed current levels of client service. Firms that continue to put themselves in the clients’ shoes and really consider what would make the clients’ experience with their lawyers an outstanding one will succeed greatly in today’s highly competitive marketplace.

What kind of service would you like from *your* service providers? Now go out and give that level of attention to *your* clients.

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