

Too Busy to Get New Clients? **Keep the Ones You Have***

By Peggy Gruenke

Why focus on client retention?

- 80 - 95% of your revenue comes from your top clients — as a client's relationship with the firm lengthens, profits rise;
- They are competitors' targets;
- They are a great source for referrals;
- They probably are paying on time and your most profitable work;
- Lower marketing cost — acquiring new clients entails certain costs that retaining existing clients does not.

The following will help you think about how well you are building the foundation for a solid practice, focused on retaining clients and building long-lasting, profitable relationships.

First, get to know your clients better. The more you know about your clients the more you will be able to help them and gain more business. Identify your five favorite clients, past and present, take them to lunch or dinner, and invite your law firm administrator along. Let them know that the firm is interested in learning more about them — challenges they are facing in their business, hobbies and family, what charities they support and what professional organizations they belong to.

Now support the causes your clients do — whether it is for a community organization, charity or volunteer event. Supporting the causes your clients do will deepen your relationship with them. After finding out what kinds of charitable groups or causes they support, here is what you can try, enlisting help from your support staff or law firm administrator:

- Get on the group's mailing list;
- Donate money or goods to the cause in your client's name;
- Instead of spending time entertaining your clients, spend that time volunteering with them. In addition to getting some one-on-one time, you'll probably get introduced to several of your client's peers and potential clients;
- Find out what is the most pressing legal issue facing the organization and offer to give a seminar to help them understand it better; and
- My favorite idea — donate a percentage of that client's fees to their charity as your holiday gift to the client.

Second, don't be afraid to ask clients the ultimate question — "How am I doing?" and ask often. I am a firm believer in the value of asking or surveying. How do you know how well you are doing if you don't ask? Your clients may provide you with some valuable feedback to improve your business. The sooner you find out there is a problem the sooner you can make adjustments and address the problem head on. Asking demonstrates you value their opinion — acting upon the knowledge you gained demonstrates you are willing to listen. Here lies the real value of conducting that client survey.

Third, learn to become a great listener and be willing to keep your promises. Being a good listener lets you get more information and enables you to ask better questions. So turn off your Blackberry and don't reply to e-mails or type a document while on the phone with your client. Allow yourself to learn more about the problems they are grappling with and suggest solutions. When ending all client conversations, ask two questions:

- What have I agreed to do and when do you expect me to do it?
- What have I promised (or predicted) will happen and when do you expect it to happen?

Asking these two questions will help you know if they are hearing what you think you are saying. Setting clear expectations — so simple and so important for all aspects of your life. Also, this keeps you from making unintentional promises you can't keep.

And lastly, add that personal touch (another opportunity to engage your support staff or law firm administrator). At the close of each matter, include a hand-written note of appreciation. This is a great marketing opportunity. You have a great target audience — an existing client who may need additional services or become a source for referrals. So don't miss this opportunity.

In summary, clients are the most important people in your practice. Clients are not dependent on you, rather you are dependent on them. Clients are an integral part of your business, the lifeblood of your practice. And, lastly, they are deserving of the most courteous and attentive treatment you can give them.

My objective here is to provide you with simple, applicable ideas which you can implement with the help of your support staff and law firm administrator. Keep in mind that your law firm administrator may be a good tool for you to have in your "winning and keeping clients" tool bucket. Don't let it sit there getting rusty — use it.

Gruenke is the chief operating officer with the law firm Finney Stagnaro Saba & Patterson handling financial operations, human resources, firm marketing and client development, information and telecommunications technology and physical facilities maintenance. She is on the board of the Greater Cincinnati Chapter of Association of Legal Administrators. She is a prior director of membership for the CBA.

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