

law practice management

newsletter

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DEVELOPMENT COUNSEL

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How to murder a client relationship

An angry client is a problem for your professional practice. But consider for a moment: a disappointed client may be a much greater danger.

Dangerous disappointment

Disappointed clients rarely write angry letters, ring you to complain or take the trouble to tell you what's wrong.

Instead, little by little, disappointed clients store up negative experiences and feelings of being badly done by or ignored. They don't complain because they lack confidence in their ability, and your will, to address their problems. As their expectations are dashed, bit by bit, disappointed clients disengage and eventually leave.

Lawyers must understand that the greater the prestige of their 'brand' and the greater their service promise, the higher the probability of creating disappointment. That is, where reality falls significantly short of promise, the insidious problem of client disappointment festers.

These are the clients most likely to be your competitor's next 'win'.

This phenomenon is growing. As your marketing, promotion and service promises improve, so client expectations grow, and with them the danger of reality falling short.

Steps you can take to deal with this insidious danger

To identify where you may need to take action, you can:

- use a range of client surveys to elicit feedback;
- ensure surveys don't just ask clients to rate your services in absolute terms (fair, good, very good and excellent) but that they ask about how the client's experience compared with their expectations;
- interpret any rating which is less than 'very good' as probable disappointment territory;
- avoid resting on ratings of 'met expectations' from a client — at least an occasional rating of 'exceeded expectations' is necessary to indicate that you're delighting (better still, thrilling!) a client once in a while;
- adopt the positive habit of asking clients, face to face, questions like, 'Are we meeting your expectations?' and 'What do you believe that I haven't yet done for you?' — then listen quietly and patiently for the answer, and gently probe for more information; and

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- always show you care about meeting client expectations — make sure they know that their satisfaction matters to you.

Identifying and reconnecting with disappointed clients

Effectively identifying

Angry clients feel violated — they want retribution

So long as you can stay calm, work through the problem and handle the complaint well, the outcome is likely to be just as positive as if there hadn't ever been a problem.

In fact, some studies have shown that

... where reality falls significantly short of promise, the insidious problem of client disappointment festers.

disappointment is the first step in reconnecting with these clients. And, it's the first step in saving you and your firm from an insidious danger.

Angry clients are business opportunities

An angry client is not usually a threat to your practice.

If a client is sufficiently angry to make it visible to you — letters of complaint, phone complaints and angry feedback on client surveys — they probably have enough emotional attachment to you and/or your firm to care about restoring a good working relationship.

Our research — in line with other studies — reveals that only around 60 per cent of clients who have a 'negative surprise' bother complaining. Those who generally believe that the problem can be fixed have a measure of confidence that you'll resolve it for them.

angry clients whose complaints are completely resolved are likely to become strong word of mouth advocates for you. Qualitative research projects conducted by our firm indicate that this is an important reality for lawyers.

You should always do your best work. But, on those occasions where you or you team have slipped up, be pleased that an angry client had enough concern for the relationship to put the energy into complaining. Put your best foot forward to address and truly resolve the complaint — it's an important business development opportunity. Fiercely and frankly engaging the issue is the best way. ●



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contributions

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