

Inside Out > column



By Christina Martini
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By David Susler
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Client service: the key to success

Here is a portion of the conversation. Additional discussion is on video at chicagolawyer.com.

How has client service changed in this economy?

Tina Martini: Client service is clearly receiving more attention and is of greater importance in view of the economy, which has made it much more of a buyer's market. As a result, attorneys in private practice are competing much more aggressively for clients and there is increased awareness that one of the most important things that distinguishes attorneys from each other is the level of attention they give to their clients. Client service is the meaningful difference between good lawyers and great lawyers. I believe it is the biggest thing clients remember about their experience with a lawyer, particularly during tough economic times when everyone is trying to do more with less.

Client service is so much more than having a deep knowledge of the substantive area in which you practice and being able to get to the right answer from a legal perspective. It really focuses on taking that legal advice, viewing it holistically and putting it into a business context that enables the client to make a sound decision for their organization.

David Susler: It has become a much more visible focus of the attorney/client relationship. The concept of client service has expanded beyond merely providing quality work. While that has been and remains of utmost importance, client service has become more of a focal point, with a particular emphasis on developing more of a partnership or collaborative relationship with your client. I agree with Tina that client service is now the primary way to differentiate between good lawyers and great lawyers. This holds true

in the in-house context as well. Just as it is important for outside counsel to provide outstanding client service to their clients, it is equally important for in-house attorneys to do the same with their in-house business colleagues.

What do in-house lawyers expect in terms of client service?

Martini: First, clients want their attorneys to understand where they are coming from and what they are trying to accomplish. They should take full ownership of their work and view the relationship as a partnership. This attitude means that outside counsel view their clients' problems as their own so if there is an issue keeping the client awake at night, their outside counsel should also be losing sleep. In-house counsel also expect their outside lawyers to understand their business well and to be able to put themselves in their clients' shoes. They want their lawyers to be creative and to think outside the box and to come up with innovative, thoughtful ideas to get the business where it wants to go. Finally, in-house counsel want their attorneys to prioritize the best interests of the client, for both the organization as a whole as well as for the client contact as an individual.

Susler: As an in-house attorney, I am both the client — with outside counsel — and the attorney serving clients — my business colleagues within my company. I work hard to deliver a top quality work product and also to provide a level of service that enables them to do their job more easily and effectively. I also practice with the goal of leaving my clients with a positive impression of lawyers and the profession. I work hard to make sure they understand I am part of their team and part of the solution to help keep our business flowing. For example, I learn their operational needs

and explain how the legal aspects of the matter facilitates or hinders our business. If I have to say no to something, I don't stop there but also bring solutions that will help close the deal and ensure the business continues moving forward. I strive to make my client look good and succeed in his or her job and leave them feeling that I made a positive difference.

What is your No. 1 piece of advice for a lawyer to improve his or her client service?

Martini: My strongest advice is to really listen to what your clients are asking for and telling you and to pay attention to both what is said and unsaid. As part of that, you should put yourself in your clients' shoes on a regular basis and consider how they feel about the issues with which they are currently grappling. In addition, you should also think about the other important aspects to client service beyond just getting to the right legal answer — which includes figuring out how quickly the client wants the advice, how in-depth it needs to be, to whom within the organization the advice is ultimately being given and what is at stake for the client, both from a legal and business perspective. This will be very helpful in gauging what your own reaction should be and how you should address the matter.

Susler: Put yourself in your clients' shoes and provide the type of client service you would want. I think two key aspects of this are 1) responsiveness and accountability and 2) open and honest communication about goals, outcomes and deliverables. You should take the lead and initiate this conversation; do not wait for your client to do so. ■

David and Tina are not only lawyers who practice on different sides of the table, but they are also married to each other.

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