

## Building strong client relationships



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**H**ere is a portion of the conversation. An extended version appears at [chicagolawyer.com](http://chicagolawyer.com).

### What do clients want from their lawyers?

**Tina Martini:** Clients want great legal advice that is customized to their specific business needs and takes into account their risk tolerance. They also want their lawyers to deliver great value to their businesses, and they expect great service. Now, lawyers need to understand that these concepts — great legal advice, risk tolerance, value and exceptional service — mean different things to different people, so the trick is to figure out how each of their clients define them and how to strike the right balance so that the relationship is a success. The “right” blend of these characteristics (and others) is constantly changing within a given relationship. Thus, it is incumbent upon lawyers to be sensitized to these dynamics and to adjust their approach accordingly.

**David Susler:** Whether the lawyer is retained for a single, discrete matter or regularly represents the client, clients want on target advice, delivered quickly, concisely, for as low cost as possible. Clients want their lawyers to help them solve their problems and help them manage risk to maximize business potential. They want their lawyers to be available when needed and to make them feel like they are their most important client. They want trusted advisers and to know their lawyers always have their backs. Certainly for those “portfolio” lawyers who regularly represent a client, the importance and sophistication of the attorney-client partnership we often speak about will be more critical. However, whether you represent a client regularly or only once, you must deliver the exceptional service Tina mentioned if your goal is successful client development.

### What is the biggest mistake a lawyer can make to lose a client?

**Martini:** There are a number of things that some lawyers do which jeopardize a relationship. Ultimately, they are all symptoms that the lawyer is not meeting their client’s needs and expectations. Overpromising and underdelivering is one of the most common mistakes. Giving legal advice in a vacuum and failing to adapt to the changing legal and business landscapes are additional fundamental mistakes. Poor communication with clients can also be a critical problem because of the potential consequences, including an inability to really listen to clients and to hear and understand what they are saying. It can also lead to an overall breakdown in the process we discussed earlier — delivering high-value legal advice with top-notch client service. These are the cornerstones of creating and maintaining a successful client relationship.

**Susler:** It is difficult to point to a single thing that is the biggest. However, if I had to choose one, I would say lying to the client. Just don’t do it. Another major mistake is egregious overbilling, meaning billing too much for certain tasks or for things you should never bill for in the first place. For example, a new company GC asks the outside counsel she has inherited to prepare a proposal for handling certain matters going forward. Do not bill that time unless you are trying to lose the client.

A third major mistake is neglecting your client. Don’t let your client think you’ve forgotten about them or your matter by going radio silent for months on end. Check in once in a while, even if just to say nothing’s happening, but here’s what and when to expect something.

**How has the client relationship changed in the last 10 years?**

**Martini:** The business world has drastically changed in the past 10 years and this is the environment in which clients are forced to live, survive and thrive. This shift was already underway when the global financial crisis hit which, in turn, has been a catalyst for even more rapid change. The end result is a buyer’s market for legal services where clients are requesting more for less and greater value than ever before. They are demanding more business-focused creativity from their lawyers. They are requesting their lawyers to approach problem-solving more as a strategic business partner and adviser than as an arms-length provider. Clients want their attorneys to invest in their relationship. This means a commitment to developing the qualities and characteristics that drive all healthy relationships, including trust, loyalty and communication.

**Susler:** One important change, as Tina said, is the shift toward a buyer’s market for legal providers. This corresponds with the continued rise in the importance and prestige of in-house counsel. In turn, that has brought about a more sophisticated relationship between in-house and outside counsel. I think the majority of in-house lawyers are interested in truly collaborative partnerships with their outside counsel. Successful outside counsel understand that, ultimately, we are (or should be) aligned with the same goals.

The ACC Value Challenge has helped bring about change in the attorney-client relationship that I think helps strengthen this partnership. Another change is the frequency with which clients change lawyers. Thus, it is more critical than ever for lawyers to develop close partnerships with their clients to enhance client retention over the long run. ■

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