



**case status**

# The **High Cost** Of Low Client Satisfaction

**and What to Do About It**

*“Our clients are smarter and more sophisticated than ever before, and they expect clear, transparent communication from their law firms.”*

# Introduction: The New Age of Client Engagement

---

*We are living in the age of Amazon.*

The company's logo even demonstrates how the company can provide you with anything you need – from A to Z (see arrow), and with talk of drone deliveries soon to come, we are heading towards an era where consumers can get anything they need or want at any time. In a recent (and rare) public interview with the Economic Club of Washington D.C., Amazon founder Jeff Bezos emphasized his company's commitment to service by saying, “the number one thing that has made us successful by far is obsessive, compulsive focus on the customer as opposed to obsession over the competitor<sup>1</sup>.”

As our world continues to evolve, so do client expectations, and it has become imperative for law firms to deliver a more gratifying customer experience in order to succeed and stand out from their competitors. While business is changing more rapidly than ever before, business fundamentals will always remain the same across all industries—happy clients become return clients.

Most lawyers enjoy spending time practicing law. Successfully litigating a complex case or structuring a great deal makes us happy, but our success is no longer solely predicated on the successes we garner on behalf of our clients. In this new age of client engagement, success is also determined by our client's level of satisfaction with our service.

In this guide, we'll examine client service in the legal profession, and give you tips for

- 1) Cultivating Client Relationships**
- 2) Becoming a Client-Centric Law Firm**
- 3) Maximizing Your Reach by Giving Your Clients a Megaphone**

*“It’s better for your client to tell you that they are unhappy with your service before they tell the world that they are unhappy with your service.”*

# Cultivating Client Relationships

---

According to a recent survey on customer satisfaction covered in the Los Angeles Times<sup>2</sup>, “Twenty-six percent of U.S. consumers said they have ‘higher customer experience expectations’ than two years ago, largely thanks to online options.” In addition to having higher expectations in general, a vast majority of consumers shared that they would not return to an establishment where they did not have a good experience. In fact, “seventy-one percent of respondents ...said they started avoiding a store, restaurant or service provider this year because of a negative interaction.”

Unhappy customers are often vocal customers, as evidenced by the volume of reviews for products and services available online. The digitization of nearly everything has changed not only how we receive goods and services, but how our clients find us, find our competitors, judge our work, and review our job performance. The internet undoubtedly provides access to an abundance of information, but with everything available in an instant, it also makes the client/service provider relationship more transactional. Clients have more options than ever before, and if they are unhappy with your service, they can find your replacement in minutes.

On the flipside, the world wide web exposes lawyers to an unlimited potential client base, but how is it that we ensure that clients pick us and continue to pick us? In a recent Forbes article<sup>3</sup>, legal profession consultant Mark Cohen claimed “the (legal) industry is fixated on ‘innovation,’ not its outcome-customer satisfaction. We will know innovation has occurred when customer satisfaction is up, and

legal services are accessible not only to large companies but also to individuals and small businesses.”

“The State of the Connected Consumer Report<sup>4</sup>” provides eye-opening statistics on long-term customer care that are directly applicable to law firm clients:

**84% of customers** say being treated like a person, not a number, is very important to winning their business.

**59% of customers** (and the majority of business buyers) say tailored engagement based on past interactions is very important to winning their business

Clearly, knowing your client is a key to keeping your client happy and to creating a long-term client relationship. Building in time to truly connect to your clients is a strong place to start.

## ***Be the Person “Relating” in the Relationship***

Ultimately, all professional relationships are based on the same fundamentals as personal relationships. To foster strength and growth, relationships need to be prioritized and nurtured, developed and celebrated. While it isn’t necessary to be “friends” in the standard sense with your clients, it is important that you truly understand them – and what their needs and expectations are for you, your firm, and your work. Inflated fees and unreasonable billing practices are fairly common complaints lodged against lawyers, but lack of “bedside” manner is another common client complaint.

As lawyers, it is often difficult to remember that we are seeing clients on some of their most difficult days – they are in the midst of a personal or professional dispute or trauma, and they desperately need our assistance. Being caring and compassionate isn't more important than being smart and savvy, but it is undoubtedly a significant consideration for clients. Clients want to be heard and valued and feel as if they are truly working in partnership with their lawyer and not engaging in a one-time transaction.

## ***Be Willing to Go the Extra Mile***

Lisa Astin Tarlton, who is a founding member of the Legal Marketing Association, advises lawyers to “demonstrate that a client’s relationship with you is worth more than the legal work you perform<sup>5</sup>.” She suggests strategies like asking a client to serve on a panel with you to illustrate a new legal strategy or making introductions for your clients to people in your professional or personal network who might be useful to them either professionally or personally.

You also may have insights on your client’s industry or on best practices in their industry that you can teach your clients to help them run their business more effectively. Teach them what you know – without a charge. While it may seem like an overly simplistic strategy, Tarlton also emphasizes the importance of saying thank you to clients and recommends that lawyers “Send a gift to honor business anniversaries or family birthdays, or just because. Make them feel important and appreciated.”

**59%**

of customers (and the majority of business buyers) say tailored engagement based on past interactions is very important to winning their business.

## ***Be Transparent in Order to Gain Client Trust***

Law firm clients cited a law firm's failure to provide cost and time predictability as one of the top reasons for client dissatisfaction<sup>6</sup>, according to a study conducted by LexisNexis and the Judge Business School at Cambridge University. Regardless of the industry or sector you work in, your clients most likely want to know how you are spending your time – and their money. Nobody likes to be surprised by a bill that extends beyond their budget. Similarly, nobody likes to be surprised by the repercussions of a failed legal strategy or result.

Explaining to your clients why you are recommending a particular tactic and where it may leave some vulnerabilities for them or their company is more meaningful than forging ahead with an air of authority. Clients should be encouraged to make informed decisions, and the impetus is on you as the lawyer to ensure that they have all of the information that they need to make the best decisions possible and clearly understand the direction that you are recommending.



# Becoming a Client-Centric Law Firm

---

What does it mean to be client-centric? A client-centric law firm examines all operations – from services offered to costs to case management procedures and communications – to ensure that what you offer best serves the needs of your client base. Prioritizing your client’s needs and desires and modifying operations so that they meet those needs and desires are the critical tenets of client-centricity.

## ***Communication is Key***

Client retention nearly always comes down to communication. “Nothing will send a profitable client packing faster than poor communication,” according to legal marketing guru Stephen Fairley of The Rainmaker Institute<sup>7</sup>. He advises clients to put consistent communications protocols in place saying that poor client communication is “...a bad habit and one you can break, even if you’re a busy solo or small firm. Put a communications process in place to fill in for the shortfalls you’ve created.” Consistent client communication creates transparency – and it is important to communicate with your clients just to check in and let them know you have nothing to report or there has been no progress on their case too. They want to be informed. Consistent communication can offer clients a picture of what you are working on and when their matter might be resolved.

*“Clients want to be heard and valued and feel as if they are truly working in partnership with their lawyer and not engaging in a one-time transaction.”*

Steady communication is a simple business-retention skill. In an article in *Texas Lawyer Magazine*<sup>8</sup>, attorney Kelli Hinson claims that communication can also be key to ending or avoiding malpractice claims. According to Hinson, “Lawyers often shy away from documenting client communications because it feels like ‘malpractice prevention’ or ‘CYA.’ But good client communication is also good customer service.”

Good communication with clients extends beyond just providing case updates. It is an attorney’s responsibility to put fee agreements in writing, and to also send termination letters when their representation ends – again, giving clients a clear understanding of the status of their matter and the bill they can expect to receive from your firm.

## ***Be Caring, Available, and Consistent***

State bar associations are flooded with calls from dissatisfied law firm clients waiting to lodge complaints. Among the most common? Clients claiming that they can't get their lawyers to call them back.

Lawyers are busy – that's a given. We've elected to work in a high-pressure, high-profile profession. Our clients may never understand the demands that we are dealing with day in and day out. What they do see is what we show them – and (often unintentionally) not being accessible, available, or responsive is a fast way to show your client that that their case is not your priority.

It's also important to note that failure to communicate effectively with clients is not just a poor business practice– it can also be a considered an ethics violation.



**26%**

of U.S. consumers said they have 'higher customer experience expectations' than two years ago

## ***How Do You Know If Your Clients are Happy? Ask.***

It's better for your client to tell you that they are unhappy with your service before they tell the world that they are unhappy with your service. Providing institutionalized opportunities for your clients to provide feedback gives you an opportunity to fix any problems and align expectations with anticipated results. The American Bar Association Law Practice Magazine's article "Focusing on Client Satisfaction"<sup>9</sup> highlights a communication issue, saying, "Just as a doctor should never diagnose or treat a patient without the patient's input, a lawyer should never help a client without the client's input. To do so creates the risks of mismatched expectations, overly high costs and missed opportunities. Despite these risks, many lawyers don't seek or use client feedback in a systematic way. Lawyers and their firms often operate without sufficient client feedback. Lack of feedback not only causes the law firm to miss many benefits, but it also deprives clients of the benefits they can reap when encouraged to give honest, candid input."

In a client-centric law firm model, you are always checking in with a client and providing them with avenues to get information and check in with you. Legal technology providers are enabling law firms to become more client-centric by providing simple and automated communications channels, easily integrating with case management software and existing platforms employed by law firms.

Introducing a formalized system for communication and feedback is a seamless way to create even greater transparency for clients, and to provide you with a way to address any problems that may arise in real time.

# Maximizing Your Reach by Giving Your Clients a Megaphone

The top way that consumers find attorneys is through referrals<sup>10</sup>, and most people ask someone they know to refer them to a lawyer. Happy, satisfied clients can be just as vocal as unhappy clients. And while “word-of-mouth” can be an effective marketing strategy, smart firms provide other forums for their clients to share information about how happy they are with the firm they selected.

**3 out of 4**

consumers who are looking for an attorney look online at some point in the process – whether they are looking to connect with an attorney directly or research an attorney they have been referred to by a friend or colleague.

**84%**

customers say being treated like a person, not a number, is very important to winning their business.

## ***Get Online and Help Get Your Clients Online***

3 out of 4 consumers who are looking for an attorney look online at some point in the process<sup>11</sup> – whether they are looking to connect with an attorney directly or research an attorney they have been referred to by a friend or colleague.

“The Internet enhances a lawyer’s ability to get referrals from friends, family, business associates, and fellow lawyers. Referrals are all about relationships and having a strong reputation. The Internet accelerates relationships and the building of a name<sup>12</sup>,” according to LexBlog founder Kevin O’Keefe.

Yelp, Google, and Facebook are increasingly becoming the go-to resources for consumers prior to making purchase decisions. Generally, law firms get fewer reviews online than most other

businesses, therefore, each review a law firm receives is significant. This is particularly important, as Google’s search engine tends to boost the rankings of businesses with positive reviews<sup>13</sup>.

So, pragmatically, it is in your firm’s best interest to make it easier for your clients – particularly your very happy clients – to leave you a review. Statistics show that seventy percent of consumers will leave a review for a business when asked to do so by the company<sup>14</sup>, giving you an opportunity to turn your clients into your firm’s online “cheerleaders.” Not only do you and your firm benefit from having a satisfied client, but a positive review can also bolster your online referral base.

## ***Make Your Service Your Brand's Selling Point***

Yes, your brand includes our logo. But as law firms evolve, much of your firm's brand – the style, voice, and feeling associated with your company – is communicated digitally. Client service can be your firm's calling card. Instead of merely listing your services on your website or Facebook page, let your client's words do the work – ask them to contribute quotes, work with them on case studies, and perhaps even create videos where clients can tell the story of working with your firm to other potential clients.

*“it is in your firm's best interest to make it easier for your clients – particularly your very happy clients – to leave you a review.”*

# Conclusion:

Clients want communication. And they want to know that their law firm cares about them and their matter. While change may be the only constant in today's business environment, it is important for lawyers and law firms to remember that we are in a business that helps people – and our clients will always be the key to our ongoing success. We need to look at our client relationships as we do other relationships, and less as transactions. Consistent communication makes our clients feel valued in a way they did at their local law office before the days of the internet.

The new era of client service isn't much different than any other era, to be honest. How we communicate and encourage our clients to communicate might have evolved, but fundamentally, our charge has remained the same – to provide superior client service as a matter of ensuring our own success. Our clients are smarter and more sophisticated than ever before, and they expect clear, transparent communication from their law firms. It is the most critical tool that you can employ to set you and your firm apart from your competitors.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/leadership-and-life-lessons-from-jeff-bezos-1536938179>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-customer-service-20180904-story.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markcohen1/2018/09/24/recommendations-for-corporate-legal-buyers-and-providers-in-the-digital-age/#1b7d3b2d369a>

<sup>4</sup> [https://c1\\_sfdstatic.com/content/dam/web/en\\_us/www/documents/e-books/state-of-the-connected-customer-report-second-edition2018.pdf](https://c1_sfdstatic.com/content/dam/web/en_us/www/documents/e-books/state-of-the-connected-customer-report-second-edition2018.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.attorneyatwork.com/six-ways-to-make-clients-happy-to-pay-your-bills/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.lexisnexis.co.uk/research-and-reports/voice-of-the-client.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.therainmakerblog.com/2018/03/articles/business-development-for-law-firms/6-tips-for-creating-a-client-retention-culture-at-your-law-firm/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.law.com/texaslawyer/2018/08/30/good-client-communication-isnt-just-good-customer-service-it-can-also-help-avoid-malpractice-claims/>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.americanbar.org/publications/law\\_practice\\_magazine/2014/may-june/focusing-on-client-feedback/](https://www.americanbar.org/publications/law_practice_magazine/2014/may-june/focusing-on-client-feedback/)

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.clio.com/resources/legal-trends/2017-report/?amp;utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=cpc&utm\\_term=%2Blegal%20trends%20%2Breport\\_b&utm\\_campaign=Clio\\_Search\\_LegalTrendsReport\\_Conversion\\_USA-CAN\\_RD&amp;gclid=CjwKCAjwgvf0BRB7EiwAeP7ehnytkcSDWdF1q4SUny4CSTNwvzghaGzHh2FF8Me\\_tGUirvOeChmxoCcl0QAvD\\_BwE](https://www.clio.com/resources/legal-trends/2017-report/?amp;utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_term=%2Blegal%20trends%20%2Breport_b&utm_campaign=Clio_Search_LegalTrendsReport_Conversion_USA-CAN_RD&amp;gclid=CjwKCAjwgvf0BRB7EiwAeP7ehnytkcSDWdF1q4SUny4CSTNwvzghaGzHh2FF8Me_tGUirvOeChmxoCcl0QAvD_BwE)

<sup>11</sup> <http://blog.larrybodine.com/2014/01/articles/tech/most-consumers-go-online-to-look-for-an-attorney/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://abovethelaw.com/2017/10/referrals-remain-leading-way-lawyers-get-clients-per-legal-trends-report/?f=1>

<sup>13</sup> <https://support.google.com/business/answer/7091?hl=en>

<sup>14</sup> <https://searchengineand.com/70-consumers-will-leave-review-business-asked-262802>