



Are Lawyers Listening And Leading? How to Build Strong Relationships

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Most lawyers know a lot about their clients and when you ask the clients, many of them will agree that their outside counsel understand them — but that there is room for improvement. There is often a gap between in house and outside counsel, and closing that gap can be easier than one may think. If the firm believes its client relationship lawyer(s) are in control and handling the relationship for the best results, think again. This perception may be wrong or right — so to insure retention and growth of these key client relationships, mind the gaps. Here are several that are mentioned often:

Firm Services

Clients often don't know what other services the firm may be able to provide them. For those firms that have conducted client interviews, this most likely rings true. And no, clients are not looking for another talking head presentation about how great the Tax or Litigation or Corporate team is. They believe the lawyers at their outside counsel firms are as good as the team they already know. They want to know that the firm and its lawyers are paying attention to what's going on with the company, and how the firm may provide value and be proactive in assisting them with their goals by introducing them to other services that meet their needs.

Shared Insights

From a recent managing partner/general counsel meeting hosted by the Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC): There is a misperception by firms that GCs are too busy to meet with firm leaders. In fact, at the meeting, GCs said that scheduling meetings with them — whether the business is a client or not — to share insights about what the firm is seeing in the marketplace or legal trends, is something most GCs would welcome (this was surprising to the managing partners in the room).

Business Understanding

Check in with clients to insure that the legal team at the firm has a strong business understanding from the clients' perspective. One GC of a large insurance company remarked, "the relationship lawyer knows everything about us — tolerance levels, our operating units, how our business people think about the

business — but the rest of his team does not. I spent three hours one day explaining to the senior associate about the various ways in which we sell our services — brokers; online; stores — not acceptable to me. I'm not sure he even understood our business any better after I was through."

It's a good habit to invite the team of lawyers who work with the client to a meeting and run through the business. If it takes an afternoon, it's time well spent as far as the clients are concerned.

Succession

If the relationship partner is the most significant connection to the client, get others from the firm involved sooner rather than later. Succession takes up to 10 years, not because the firm isn't planning correctly (although we know this is a difficult challenge for most firm leaders), but because relationships run deep. And who the firm thinks should be the next relationship lawyer is not always in sync with who the client thinks should be the relationship lawyer. Clients want to be involved in this important retention decision. This is one of the most significant gaps identified and getting it right is critical to many firms' futures.

Minding the Gaps

Take this simple quiz to see if there are any other gaps that may exist at your firm.

1. Are we set up to gather client feedback on a continuous basis?
2. Do we track the voice of the client across multiple channels, such as formal feedback interviews, research from third-party sources, meetings, ad hoc conversations, etc.?
3. Do we understand the full set of factors that the client uses to evaluate our performance?
4. Do we have visibility into the client's strategic plans?
5. Can we analyze what our clients are doing — that is, their behavior as well as what they are saying?
6. Is client feedback managed centrally and made available across the firm?
7. Does our research allow us to "get out in front" of the client and lead forward-looking conversations about the client's business?
8. Do we have a strong relationship with at least three C-level contacts and do we know what they think of us/our team? Is our business secure in their minds?
9. Can we develop research quickly to help clients understand emerging events that will affect their business?
10. Do we have a person or team responsible for making sure feedback from each key client is addressed by the firm?

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