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How do you know if you are giving a great service unless you ask?

Technical quality is one thing. Service quality is another.

There are plenty of technically competent lawyers. There are fewer that are service quality competent.

Take your own experience. Have you dealt with a professional recently? Did they do the following?

- Understand the unique nature of your business?
- Listen carefully to what you had to say?
- Explain what they were going to do and why?
- Help you understand the reasons behind what was going on rather than just telling you what was going on?
- Keep you informed when you wanted to be?
- Avoid jargon?
- Make sure they were accessible when you wanted them to be?
- Keep their promises?
- Keep to deadlines?
- Involve you in major points of the work?
- Show an interest beyond the work at hand?
- Be helpful beyond the task for which they were paid?

Because very few referrals are based on technical competence and the vast majority, (90%) are related to the issues above it makes sense to know if you are consistently good at all the above.

Law firms that exhibit consistent competence across these areas can also charge more and retain clients.

Do you ask your clients if you are an excellent service provider? Do you have a system in place that recognises the importance of measuring and improving the client's experience of working with you?

I am not talking here about a training programme that you run for new employees. I am not advising you to "do client service training once a year". Because if you look at the list it is not rocket science and not beyond the average person's capability. So it is a matter of "doing it".

Doing it requires discipline. It means you have to know that every little thing you do adds to the whole experience. And it takes someone special who wants to make every little thing count and do it in the best way possible.

Managing partners should want to create the environment where everyone is disciplined and wants and knows how to make improvements in everything they do for the benefit of the client, the firm and their own development.

Lawyers therefore need a system. It is only by systemising that discipline becomes automatic, measurable and results improve. It's no good just saying "I want everyone to do their best" and leaving it at that on January 1st every year and expecting huge improvements by New Year's Eve.

How Do You Create Your System?

There are five distinct elements to your system.

1. Measurement – where are you now and how much have you improved?
2. Management – how are you going to achieve improvements and implement them?
3. Tools – what do you need to make the system work?
4. Training – how are you going to impart knowledge on a regular basis?
5. Rewards – how are you going to reward good behaviour and effort and not just results?

Measurement –

Do you have a survey which you send to every client at the end of the engagement? A survey is a systematic way of getting feedback. It does not have to replace other informal methods. But it does introduce a formality to recording client services levels and forces accountability.

Accountability is key. It introduces staff into the inescapable requirement to continually improve all areas. And the measurement factor means that improvement over time can be monitored. For what's the use of a survey if it is not to implement changes and improve over time?

And do not worry about bringing things to the surface that a client may not have thought to complain about. If a client is dissatisfied **in any way, they will be dissatisfied whether you ask them or not. The act of sending a survey will make the client think that you do care. Particularly if you let them know the action you will be taking as a result of their feedback.**

To get a client to answer a survey it has to be easy to complete. A more detailed survey that is posted, (rather than face to face or over the phone) elicits better answers that are more truthful and therefore more useful. And send it from a partner responsible for Service Quality rather than from someone that is part of the team working with the client. This will mean that the survey is taken seriously by the client and internally.

Management –

If you ask for client feedback you have to do something about it when you get it. How the responses are dealt with is paramount.

Each member of the team and the Service Quality Partner (SQP) should receive a copy. The SQP should discuss the responses to each question with the team and/or senior partner managing the team. The resultant action may be;

- A personal, handwritten letter thanking them for their comments and permission to use them as a testimonial.
- A visit from the engaging partner to discuss areas where the client is not fully satisfied.
- A visit from the Service Quality Partner because the quality was not there.

Ongoing measurement

Over the following months, results can be tabulated and teams can be compared for their results.

Motivationally, showing results within the firm will make people want to improve. Not everyone responds to competition in exactly the same way but if results are compared on a team basis there is no singling out of individuals.

Partners responsible for teams can however be singled out. Because it is only by measuring and discussing things that every Partner can help the overall performance of the firm.

The Survey – How To Send It And Who To Send It To

The engagement Partner should let the client know that the Quality Service Partner will be sending a survey asking for feedback.

The survey should be posted out and a return envelope enclosed addressed for the QSP. This helps for two very good reasons. One, the client realises that he can be honest because it is going to the "boss" and two, the team knows that there is an internal commitment to quality.

Clients appreciate the opportunity to give feedback. And you should not restrict yourself to sending out just one survey if there have been a number of people involved client side. This also prevents abuse of the system through sending out to firm friendly contacts only.

And What It Covers

The more specific the questions and the easier they are to answer the greater the return rate.

25 multiple choice questions and a comment box for comments that the respondent wants to write will not take too long to complete.

Do not make the survey a direct sales tool designed to elicit more business. That will come if you get the firm's quality service right anyway. Being sneaky does not work.

Tools

How do you enhance the service quality you give to clients? Can you ensure that the things you learn throughout the firm are disseminated to all staff so that every client can benefit?

1. Your survey will help to identify things you do well and not so well.
2. Identify a cross departmental team to document the steps that lead to good scores in current surveys – this then forms part of the firm workbook of "How we deal with clients to ensure a quality service we are proud of".
3. Areas where you are not doing well can be attacked by the same team. They can ask for improvement ideas from all staff for areas where the firm is underperforming. Various creative thinking techniques, such as the Idea Box, can be used for this.

4. The improved ideas can then become part of the workbook and system for dealing with clients. All your ideas need to be continually improved and monitored. What is great today is only good tomorrow.
5. Continually monitor the competition within and outside the legal industry for ideas that improve client service quality, particularly in relation to the areas that most firms fall down on as discussed above. Have you noticed how the National Health Service reminds you of important appointments by SMS text messages? Can you do the same?*For a list of potential ideas that can improve client service.
6. Create a flow chart of what you want a client to think about every contact and stage he is engaged with you. Create the actions required to make the client think of you as a quality service provider. For example, if you want a first time telephone caller to feel special, and you are going to put them through to a junior fee earner to talk about a Will, the receptionist can introduce the fee earner in this way " I am just putting your through to our Wills expert, Jim Smith."
7. Look at the things that professionals you use could do better or do better than you do and ask them why and how they do it.

Training – how to disseminate contact skills throughout the firm.

Training programs should transfer knowledge, (here's the successful way of doing things) and develop skills, (here's the skills you are going to need to deal with various situations).

They should enable the collected wisdom and experience of the firm to be shared among all staff.

Skill building

This can include presentation training, how to handle meetings and how to write jargon-free correspondence. It can also include typical soft skills required in everyday work such as;

- How to influence clients
- How to sell
- How to tell a client they're wrong
- How to get clients to implement advice

Rewarding Excellent Service

The practice needs to reward those who are excellent service givers and punish those who fall below acceptable levels. It's not just that you can do the job, but how well you do it.

There should be at least 12 months before client satisfaction scores become the benchmark for reward. This is because it will take at least this long for staff to get up to speed.

How To Get Started

Once the Partners have decided to implement a Quality Service feedback system, then it is important to do a test. This will enable the firm to check that the questions are delivering the right feedback, the clients are happy filling in the survey and that there is valuable information being discovered.

You should allow six months of tweaking to get the survey right after the test. These six months of tweaking will also mean staff see that management are serious about this process and that it is here to stay.

Once you have a survey that is working well there is no need to wait until the end of the engagement to implement its use. Using it mid-engagement is like keeping the team on track, because if feedback is coming back negative it means there is still time to turn things round or amend them for the better. And acting in a better way for the client is what it is all about.

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*Some improvement ideas;

- Give clients options and let them choose
- Give client recordings of all important meetings and telephone conversations
- Make meetings more valuable and work better; establish goal, agenda, who is attending, send reports in advance, manage time in meeting, achieve goal, follow up
- Have all reports read by non-lawyer to ensure clarity
- Have all reports and documents produced in style of client so they don't have to do any work to use them
- Help client use and implement what is produced
- Be accessible and available, home and mobile numbers
- Ensure juniors are fully briefed to deal with client in partner absence