



## **DON'T BURN BRIDGES BEFORE YOU BUILD THEM!**

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I had lunch today with a vendor who is also a friend. I became acquainted with her more than 20 years ago, and quickly came to respect her. She was detailed, precise, communicative, always good for her word, and service-oriented. When the sale was over she never disappeared from the scene. When a problem arose she always seamlessly and gladly interceded to minimize the effort I needed to get a quick resolution. She made it clear that she was my salesperson “for life” and that I could contact her for anything. On the occasions she could not deliver what I needed, she always graciously put me in touch with someone who could.

Over the years, which included many different positions for each of us, we stayed in touch and continued to conduct business. I also had many occasions to refer other customers to her. I never got a bad word of feedback from those I referred.

In time I also came to appreciate her good sense of humor and straight-forward outspoken manner on a personal level. I found I enjoyed our animated conversations, which usually and effortlessly covered a gamut of business and personal topics. Thus we gradually developed a friendship in addition to our professional relationship.

When I think about it, her admirable traits are precisely those required of an attorney who desires to successfully develop his or her practice. And as I thought of that in the back of my mind during our lunch today —always thinking about topics for my next article— she relayed two stories to me about law firms she has dealt with recently.

The first story concerned a law firm to whom she recently sold a telephone system. The terms of the sale were 50% with the signing of the order, and the remaining 50% upon installation. These are typical terms. As is her style, she didn't turn the project over to the installation team and disappear when the sale was completed, like most salespeople do. She remained at the firm overseeing the project “on her own dime” to make sure everything went smoothly. She was there until after 10:00 pm to assure herself everything was done right and working properly.

When she approached the partner who purchased the system and asked him to cut a check for the remaining balance, he refused. As she recalled, he stated, "Just because it works now, how do I know it'll be working tomorrow? I'm going to hold off on paying for a week or two until I'm sure it's working as promised." When she reminded him of the terms, and the warranty which assured him of satisfaction should something go awry, he responded, "What are you going to do about it, take the system out?"

My friend works on commission. The end of month was soon at hand. If she didn't return to her company with the firm's check she would have to wait an entire additional month to receive her commission. She was having dental problems and needed her commission check for an upcoming dentist appointment. So she contacted the partner at the firm and again asked for the money. The system was still working perfectly. She was advised that the check would be waiting for her at the front desk.

Much to her dismay, the check was not waiting for her, and the partner was not in the office. She approached another partner of the firm and inquired about the check. She told me that the partner was unapologetic, and sneered at her for coming to pick up the check in person. He said he was insulted because "in all my years as an attorney no vendor has harassed me for payment before." She related that he went on to point out how successful the firm was based on much money they make, in order to make her feel stupid for worrying about getting paid. All she wanted was enough money for her dentist visit, not to have her nose rubbed in his success.

I wish I could say that the treatment she received was an exception. But unfortunately it is not. Many lawyers treat vendors and other "non lawyers" and "non clients" with similar disregard and disdain. So frequently, in fact, that I previously published an article on this topic.

Now pay attention to what she stated next. She said, "How does he (the lawyer) know that I'm not married to, friends with, or related to someone rich and powerful who might be his next potential client? Hmmm. Think about that for a moment. She's right. And in fact, she knows many such people. And she will share her story, relaying the name of the firm and the two partners, to all who will listen. And just as word of mouth can bring future clients to the door, word of mouth can prevent them from arriving as well. And for each client who does *not* arrive, there will be a geometric expansion of additional referrals which will never materialize.



The lesson to be learned here is a basic one you should never forget. Treat everyone with the courtesy and respect you would accord your best client or brightest prospect. Never assume that the “little people” can’t make a significant impact on your practice development efforts over time. And that includes vendors, employees, opposing counsel, and even the lowliest employees of your current clients. Trust me when I say that what you put “out there” will come back ten-fold in your future. For more about how to do this “right” I suggest you read “Marketing 101 Lesson for Young Lawyers” which appeared in the July 3, 2006 issue of *The Pennsylvania Bar News*.

The second story my friend related concerned another law firm customer. During their telephone installation process she had occasion to make idle conversation with one of the partners. The conversation got around to her dental problems, and the fact that she was trying to get a refund from her former dentist to pay her current dentist for correcting the problem. Although the partner did not do this type of work, he spent a considerable amount of time explaining the litigation process and how she might proceed with an action against her former dentist. He made some phone calls and gave her a referral to several attorneys who might handle her case. A few days later she received some additional relevant information in the mail from the attorney, to help her understand her potential damages even better.

Not only did she relate the second story with praise for this attorney and his firm, but she detailed the type of work they did, and even gave me his business card in case I had an opportunity to refer work. She referred to this firm as a “class act” — her words were a stark contrast to her description of the other firm. She mentioned she had already had the opportunity to refer one prospective client to the firm.

Clearly, the partner of this firm was very astute. He had treated her with the care and diligence one might normally bestow on a good client or referral source. And in doing so, he further expanded his good “word of mouth” sphere of influence.

If you are tempted to treat someone with disdain, disrespect or disregard, or to eviscerate someone in order to make yourself feel bigger or better in the process, beware. No matter how inconsequential that person may seem at the moment, know that sooner or later those actions will come back to roost. Instead, go out of your way, even when it is difficult, to treat everyone you encounter with respect. Treat them like they will control the next client you gain, or the matters you will receive in the future from existing clients. Because you never know when that will



be the case. In other words, don't burn your bridges before you get to build them.

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