



IMPROVING CLIENT SERVICE: YOUR TELEPHONES AND VOICEMAIL

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If you ask just about any attorney, he or she will tell you that they are client service-oriented; that the practice of law is after all a service business. But there is not a single firm where service cannot be improved, and sometimes in rather significant ways. And given today's business environment, no firm can afford to overlook any opportunity to improve upon client service.

In this article I'm going to pick on telephone practices. In the course of my work as Law Practice Management Coordinator at the Pennsylvania Bar Association, and as a private consultant, I call dozens of law firms each day. Here are some real life experiences which illustrate what NOT to do at your firm. Your firm may be included among these, but there's a good chance that you won't know unless you make it your business to find out.

Firm ABC chooses to have an automated attendant pick up their calls. The caller is directed to enter the extension of the desired party in order to complete the call. A directory option is available. After spelling the party's name in the directory, the call is transferred. But neither "Silicon Sally" nor the attorney's voicemail announces the actual extension selected. Therefore, unless the caller remembers to ask the attorney for the extension, the caller must again look up the name in the directory for the next call, which is time consuming. Service would be improved if each party would simply begin their voicemail recording by saying "This is attorney Smith at extension 344..." Better yet, mail each client a printed directory which fits in their wallet.

Firm DEF wants all calls to be answered by a "live" person. However, their receptionist is over-worked and/or under-trained, and after the call goes unanswered for 5 rings, the automated attendant picks up the call after all with a recording that says, "We are sorry, our receptionist is busy—Your call is important to us—Please remain on the line and we will be with you momentarily." The moments spread into minutes, and the now-annoying message replays over and over. After a typical wait of about five minutes on hold with this firm, a receptionist finally picks up. She is unapologetic, and when the lengthy delay is mentioned, her

only response is “I’m just covering for the receptionist.” The secretaries should be taught teamwork to cover phones for the receptionist. An option to leave a message in a general mailbox, rather than wait on hold for so long, would be a reasonable solution. And the receptionist’s attitude must be “adjusted” so she doesn’t worsen the situation, and that includes anyone who temporarily wears that “hat”.

Some firms have too few lines, and yield persistent busy signals. At many firms calls being transferred from one extension to another are routinely disconnected, intercepted by an incorrect person who then hangs up in embarrassment, or sent to voicemail without the caller’s permission. Sometimes when the caller “escapes” to the operator so as to leave some detailed instructions, the operator responds that she must put the caller back into voicemail as she’s “not allowed” to take messages.

Callers should always be given the option to leave a message with a live person. Then the message taker can dictate it into the correct party’s voicemail. No one should ever be forced to use voicemail if they don’t want to. Callers should be asked whether or not they want to be transferred to voicemail if the called party is unavailable, and not simply wind up in voicemail. And when firms fail to provide adequate training, misrouted and disconnected calls are all too often the result.

And then of course there are those who don’t listen to their messages on a timely basis, and those who listen but just don’t bother to respond. The latter being even less excusable in my mind. All calls should be returned to clients within six to twelve hours at the outside. Some firms require that at least someone call to acknowledge the message within two hours whenever possible. Those are firms who understand client expectations and work to delight their clients. When you interview potential clients prior to taking on an engagement, you should discuss what their expectations are regarding response time to telephone messages, faxes, emails and so forth.

At firm XYZ client calls are avoided when the information the client is expecting has not yet arrived at the appointed time. Clients will leave message after message in the attorney’s or secretary’s voicemail, and they will be purposely ignored. Instead, the attorney should instruct his/her secretary to call the client BEFORE the client calls the firm, to advise that the information/check/whatever has not yet arrived, and that he/she is working on it and will advise as soon as it arrives. The current attitude treats clients dismissively as “pests”. I suggest they be treated like valued clients instead. Because believe me, another firm will be delighted to treat them better.



Even if you don't recognize your firm here, chances are there are aspects of your telephone call management which can be improved. As you place calls to other law firms, clients, vendors, and particularly other professionals, make a written note any time you encounter particularly good or bad call management practices. Then audit your own office practices. Are your practices every bit as good as the ones you've made note of? Have you any of the bad practices on your list? If so, take corrective measures without delay. Use your list as a basis to have a discussion with your staff about current practices and ways to improve them. Make sure everyone is properly trained. Make sure all staff know that they are expected to assist the receptionist and each other to answer ringing phones within no more than five or six rings. Explain to them that they are the "managers of first and last impression."

The State Bar of Wisconsin (800-728-7788 or www.wisbar.org) has a great training videotape entitled "Professional Communications in the Law Office: Telephones, Voicemail and Beyond" which I strongly recommend be reviewed by all staff.

To audit your present telephone management techniques, you should frequently ask clients for candid feedback, ask friends, family and peers to periodically assist you in placing "test calls" to your office during busy times, and solicit feedback from your staff.

Keep in mind that progress is a process, not an event. That means that improvement comes in a series of small, incremental steps which overall add up to superior client service.

In a different article I'll take a look at client service with respect to email and other forms of communication with clients. Hopefully, by then you should be ready to fine tune another area of client service.

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