The Art of Client-Centered Communication

Written by Willie Peacock

What is client-centered communication? And how can a firm be client-centered? The practice of law is all about helping clients, so aren't we all client-centered?

In a way, yes. But there is a reason why the most common bar complaint has often been due to a lack of communication: We may serve clients, but lawyers generally are not great at communicating with them.

In many cases, it's tough for potential clients to get in touch with lawyers. Our 2024 secret shop, found in the *Legal Trends Report*, found that 67% of firms did not respond to new-client inquiry emails, and 48% of law firms were unreachable by phone. Additionally, when the firm responded or answered the phone, they were not very communicative or informative.

If we hope to become truly client-centered—making the client's experience and relationship with your firm the highest of your law firm's priorities—a great place to start is working on communication. Client-centered communication is not an exact science—it is more of an art, and it takes place from the moment you start marketing to a client to long after you wrap up the case.

Truthful, genuine marketing

How many lawyer websites read like they were written by a robot? How many sound exactly the same? At various points in my career, I've worked with legal marketing companies that put together those generic websites. And I've seen what sort of content gains traction, both in terms of search traffic (which gets you in front of potential clients) and conversion (actually signing clients).

It's not the mass produced robo-content that "ranks." Instead, it is the content that speaks to users' needs that wins. It is *client-centered* content that delves into typical client concerns, provides enough information to be useful, and isn't a generic "we are lawyers with experience so hire us now" sales pitch.

Consults and scheduling

I've been a solo attorney. And I've been the rookie at a bigger law firm. I have handled a lot of intake calls and consults. The worst part, by far, is always the scheduling of a time to come in—especially if you have to reschedule, which invariably leads to a dozen emails or an awkward phone call while the law firm thumbs through multiple lawyers' schedules while still trying to make the potential client feel like a high priority.

To me, there are few greater inventions than meeting scheduling software. Not the annoying artificial "intelligence" bots that still, somehow, take twenty emails to propose random times and end up scheduling something for the middle of the night or worse, but the simple platforms that say, "Hey. Pick a time that works for you." What could be a more logical, simple solution that displaying available times and letting the client pick one?

This is where the "art" part comes in. Because while I may think that a self-service scheduler is the most brilliant innovation since the rotary cheese grater, others find the experience ... well, grating. I stumbled across a surprising discussion amongst a bunch of lawyer-techies (the exact sort I'd expect to love these tools) where many actually expressed antipathy toward these scheduling tools, which one person said "dehumanized" the process.

What about clients? While most lawyers are like me, and assume clients like these paragons of efficiency, one of the many surprising findings in the *2018 Legal Trends Report* was that 59% of the consumers surveyed said that they prefer to schedule an appointment over the phone. And the majority of the generation that lives on text and emojis, millennials, also reported that they would prefer to talk to a human rather than communicate back and forth over email and text.

I guess I'm not entirely with my own generation on that one. Then again, if I'm running a client-centered practice, whose opinion matters more: mine or the clients'?

What's the status of my case?

A buddy of mine runs a very successful solo practice predicated on volume. And despite revenue blowing up—tenfold over his first year in business—his biggest problem was managing his support staff. Specifically, no matter how many assistants he hired, they were always on the phone.

Why? They were answering clients' inquiries regarding case statuses. Simple requests for updates, asked multiple times per case, multiplied by hundreds of cases, as a huge time suck for his support staff.

His solution won't shock the tech lovers out there: He built an online system where clients could log in to see the status of their case. To me that's brilliant. It is why I recommend a similar solution, Case Status, to anyone who uses Clio for a volume practice. Tools like Hona can also be helpful for keeping clients up-to-date.

But how do clients feel about it? If we go by what the millennials said in the *Legal Trends Report*, they may prefer the human touch. But if your firm doesn't have an army of receptionists ready to answer an endless string of status update calls, an automated system for proactively handling case status updates is definitely better than no communication at all.

Plus, that little bit of automation may free up more time for your staff to work on the actual cases and getting results faster—which may be even more client-centered than answering a millennial's call. Just remember to deliver the bad news via humans: No one wants to hear challenging news from a chatbot.

Asking for feedback

If there is one thing I tell every firm or attorney that asks about marketing, it is this: Work on reviews first. Make it part of the firm's billing process. Once you get that positive outcome for a client, and before you send out the bill, ask for a feedback on how you and your firm did. If the feedback is positive, invite them to leave a review for your firm online as well.

In an ideal world, you would be seeking feedback throughout the case and incorporating the feedback into the way you do business. If that is too much—and I know many attorneys who, for some reason, feel like inviting any feedback is beneath them—asking for it right before the final bill should at least let you incorporate the feedback for future clients. And if you can't do it, ask your assistant to send the feedback request.

(Why as for feedback before the final bill? If you wait until they get their last bill, not only has the shine of your recent performance worn off, but it is likely that, if they do provide feedback, it will be related to the bill. And if they can't afford the bill, they may be dodging you now that their case is over and you'll get no feedback at all.)

Easy-to-read bills

Speaking of billing, I have seen bill entries that look like this:

- TC w OC, OP RE: Vacay, §720 desig, set M&C. (.75, 8.22)

Or like this:

- Call OC, OP. 45min. 8.22

One is so densely packed with abbreviations, even other lawyers may have trouble decoding it.[1] (Answer is in a footnote.) The other is so devoid of detail that it would be natural to wonder what the call was about, and if it was even related to the case.

Client-centered communication, when it comes to billing, isn't a mind-blowing revelation. Putting a few billing best practices into action can create a better experience for your client. For example, write notes explaining the entries that a layperson can understand, and invite the client to reach out with any questions on the bill.

There is no exact recipe

You're probably thinking, "this is a lot of maybes." That's exactly why being client-centered is more of an art than a science. Like any good lawyer, I'll have to tell you that the answer really "depends." Whether your clients will need more human phone calls, or whether calendar apps and proactive automated case updates are enough, will depend on:

- **Who your clients are:** Tech-savvy clients may be okay with less human touch (though there are surprises, like millennials);
- **The type of case:** Some practice areas are urgent and sensitive (a child custody dispute, for example) while others lend themselves to text updates (routine transactional work);
- **When you deploy the technology:** What is an unfamiliar technology today may be routine within a year or two. After all, could you imagine texting your clients just a few years ago? Or setting up a personal, secure online messaging login?

With so many maybes, that feedback that we mentioned earlier—the feedback that so many lawyers are afraid to ask for—is key. Constant polling of your client base, listening to client feedback, and acting on it through incremental improvement of your processes, is how the art of client-centered communication really revolutionizes the way your firm does business.

About Clio

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