



BY HEATHER SUTTIE

Small Steps to Big Changes

Despite the fear-mongering about legal services, change doesn't have to be drastic to be effective

LAWYER FRIENDS OF mine, especially those at mid-size and large firms, say they are scared witless by the incessant buzz about “big changes” that are supposedly required to how they do business. While those in the legal profession tend to be cautious to the point of risk-aversion, the fear-mongering isn't helpful. In fact, for some people, these stories are as threatening as their subject matter and, instead of prompting change, are liable to backfire, effectively cementing fear and inertia, which could be fatal.

To avoid the inertia, law firm leaders and managing partners should consider taking action on a few small steps that can bring about big changes.

TALK TO YOUR CLIENTS Clients are the foundation of your livelihood, whether you're an independent practitioner or a member of a large law firm. Clients deserve to be kept happy or, better yet, delighted. Asking for their feedback has never been more important. If you don't talk to your clients, someone else will.

Lawyers and firms that survey clients stand head and shoulders above those that don't. By doing so, you will increase goodwill, and can expect to receive more and better quality files as well as referrals. If all or some of the surveys can be done in person, you're miles ahead of the competition. Second best is via phone.

Both styles demonstrate that you care enough about the client to engage in conversation. Electronic surveys are simple to manage, but are impersonal and easy to ignore by hitting the delete key. When conducting a survey, my go-to question is “What can we do better?” because it signals the desire to deliver top-quality performance, and the answer reveals exactly what will make the client happy.

THE MONEY CONVERSATION Clients understand you're not running a charity. They expect to pay but need a sense of what the cost might be, even if the amount is a ballpark figure or within a range.

Talking money is good business. Getting into this by saying “You're probably wondering what this might cost” enables you to have a conversation about potential fees and expenses. Remember to spend a client's money as if it were your own, and make sure the client knows this — it will go a long way to helping earn and keep their trust.

Keeping a client regularly informed on the progress of a file and associated costs helps to manage expectations around the current scope of work, while enabling a conversation to more easily happen if scope needs to change. Speaking openly about money helps all parties manage budgets and curtail unpleasant surprises.

50-WORD COMMUNICATIONS Law firm clients — especially corporate counsel — say they want short bulletins that target issues pertaining to their industry. Blanket communications that cover a practice area or topic and drone on ad nauseam are deadly. Bulletins must encapsulate the highlights of the issue and be capped at 50 words to fit on a single screen of a smart phone. This means getting to the meat of the matter fast. For those wishing analysis or background information, a “more” link included at the bulletin's end can route readers to the firm's website.



YOUR BIO MUST SING Bios are the second most visited section of a firm's website. These profiles must feature you and your work, of course, but their content must also be directly relevant to clients and act as music to their ears. Explain how clients have benefitted from your skills. Back this up with client work examples. Be careful of tone: people like to work with people they like, and nobody likes a braggart. So verbosity is out; humility is in.

And keep it pithy: 150 words tops. Hardly anyone reads; instead they scan, so a bio that appears as a wall of copy will be summarily ignored. The inclusion of a recent headshot photo, ideally in colour, is an expectation not a nice-to-have.

Change can be difficult, but taking matters into your own hands whenever possible beats waiting to be told what to do and how to do it. These four steps are totally doable. Best get on with it. 📌

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