



## Clients want lawyers to stop ignoring emails and phone calls



Canadian legal technology company Clio found the majority of lawyers neglect their emails, and most wait more than 72 hours or more to reply to voice mails



*Heather Suttie often speaks at events about legal marketing and business development*

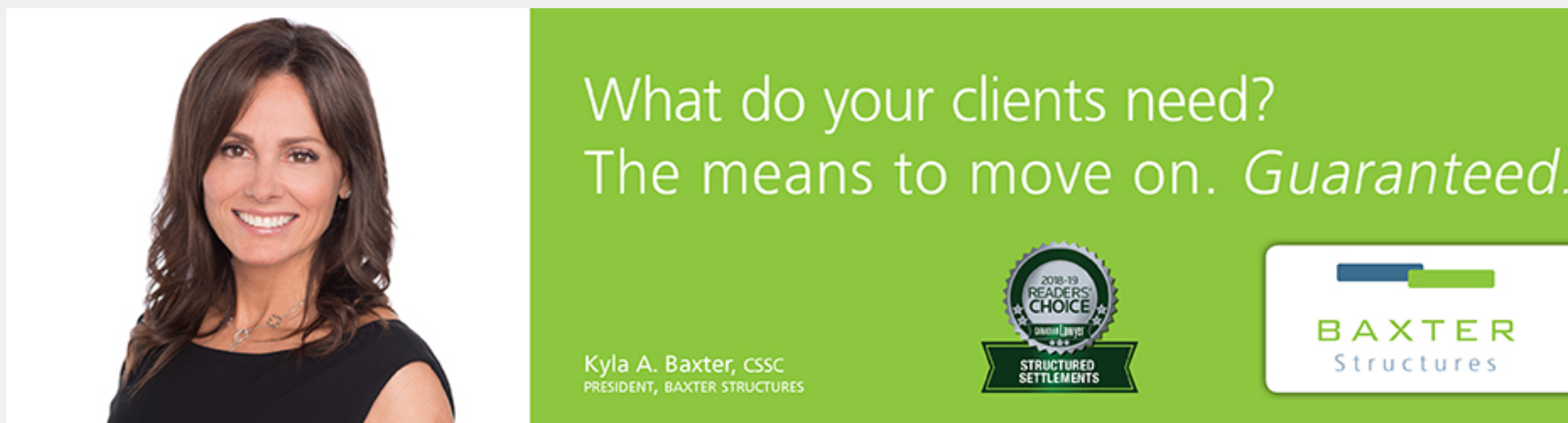
BY [Anita Balakrishnan](#) / 22 Oct 2019

Share    

The majority of lawyers neglect their emails, and most wait more than 72 hours or more to reply to voice mails, one su says.

Canadian legal technology company Clio did the survey with a research firm and found that when 1,000 firms were contacted about a potential client, 60 per cent of firms did not respond by email. Out of 500 firms contacted by phone, more than half still hadn't responded to a voice mail after 3 days.

Further, Clio's report says "the majority of firms were not able to provide adequate information when responding to the client questions" either by email or phone. The survey directed questions about child custody to family lawyers, questions about domestic abuse charges to criminal lawyers, questions about debt elimination to bankruptcy lawyers and questions about racial discrimination to employment lawyers.



What do your clients need?  
The means to move on. *Guaranteed.*

Kyla A. Baxter, CSSC  
PRESIDENT, BAXTER STRUCTURES

2018-19  
READERS' CHOICE  
STRUCTURED SETTLEMENTS

BAXTER  
Structures

While Clio focused this survey on U.S. firms, the situation is similar in Canada, says Heather Suttie, who does legal marketing strategy and management consulting with Canadian and international firms.

"Responsiveness is a soft skill, and it's surprising how many law firms fail at it," she says. "When someone is looking to hire a lawyer or a law firm, for many people who haven't done this before or in some cases have, law firms are as fungible as peanut butter. They are the same and they can be swapped out. Exemplary client service can be a huge differentiator. That's something that smart law firms capture and it's not hard."

Clio suggests that firms should respond to emails within 24 hours and answer at least one question about the issue or how the lawyer could help. Additionally, Clio's report suggests providing information about consultation and bookings. According to Clio, 82 per cent of clients surveyed said timeliness was important, and 79 per cent said they expected responses in 24 hours. Clio's data shows that on average, "law firms typically respond within 24 hours or not at all."

It can be difficult when a lawyer is in court all day to keep up with phone calls and emails, says Suttie. But there are ways that firms can — and must — improve.

"Lawyers are always very busy, if they are fortunate. But you have to keep your eye on the front end of the sales pipe," she says. "A time may come where you are not as busy. The clients you should have responded to, or responded to more fully, have gone off to another provider — one who could respond to them within 24 hours, and provided information that they need."



Options include having an assistant let potential clients know that the lawyer is out of the office so they can know when to expect a response. Firms can create an intake process or transfer potential clients to the business development team to answer certain questions.

“It takes a lot of bravery for clients to be in touch — lawyers can be intimidating. Clients approaching a law firm are often frightened. Quelling that by being responsive is an enormous boost right off the bat,” she says. “And if they’ve got an actual matter, and they can’t get a response — people need to know where the matter stands, and what the next steps are going to be, so they can prepare. There is nothing worse than not knowing.”

Soft skills can also be made a priority in the hiring — and firing — process, says Suttie. She points to a quote often attributed to Theodore Roosevelt: “No one cares how much you know, until they know how much you care”

“Legal is a service business,” she says. “Abiding by the ‘golden rule’ will go a long way for improving your reputation and your client care.”

Alistair Vigier is not a lawyer but serves as CEO of ClearWay Law, a role he says allows lawyers to focus on law while experts manage important business decisions about technology, marketing and accounting.

Vigier says that lawyers may feel afraid to delegate, but it’s a failure to insist on answering the phone — and not answering. Or, if not enough time is dedicated to responding to new client inquiries, a lawyer might shoot back a tone-deaf email such as “Call me,” which doesn’t put the client’s mind at ease and could come off as egotistical, says Vigier.

Instead, law firms might consider using an answering company to filter out queries that are in unrelated areas of law, have incompatible legal aid requirements, or are simply outside the lawyer’s jurisdiction, Vigier says. Much of the intake process can also be done without much oversight from the lawyer: gathering contact details, doing conflict checks, sending letters of engagement, and explaining how much the services will cost.

Moreover, leaving clients in the dark is an access to justice issue, says Vigier. It will stand out if a law firm gives worse customer service than the Starbucks app, he says.

“If you are reaching out to a lawyer for a divorce, it was an extremely hard decision for you, and you want to get some answers today so you can sleep at night. The answers are not legal advice. They are not asking about a section of the Divorce Act. They want to know the process of how to hire a law firm,” he says. “And they want to know the estimate of

... I can budget for it, I can plan out my next few weeks. That's closure. That's answers. Lawyers are terrible at doing I certainly don't want to wait a week, that's horrible."

## Related stories

[Close to 50% of Canadian businesses will turn to alternative legal service providers within 5 years](#)

[Lawyers applaud law firm policies that limit after-hours emails and support time management](#)

## Free newsletter

Our daily newsletter is FREE and keeps you up to date on all the developments in the Ontario legal community. Please complete the form below and click on subscribe for daily newsletters from Law Times.

Enter your Email address here

SIGN UP

## Recent articles & video



**[Clients want lawyers to stop ignoring emails and phone calls](#)**