

“IF YOU WANT A FRIEND, BE A FRIEND” AND OTHER RELATIONSHIP TIPS FOR LAWYERS



By Sally Field, J.D.

“If you want a friend, be a friend” my wise mother used to always tell us growing up. When she first said it to me, I had no idea what she was talking about. As I formed friendships, some lasting and some not, I began to understand her words more and more. It is sort of like the Golden Rule – and both are relationship tips that work to help build wonderful relationships with clients.

Lawyers are intimidating people to many non-lawyers, and lawyers’ offices are intimidating places. Some lawyers think that is the natural order of things – that clients should be impressed (think intimidated) by their lawyer. Think again. Being intimidating can alienate your clients and give them a reason to dislike you. Any client who dislikes you is more likely to sue you.

The below relationship rules – all derived from either the Golden Rule and the “be a friend rule” – can help you establish a more successful practice, as well as prevent malpractice claims from arising.

Become a stellar client picker - Pick clients to whom you can relate. If you are like most people, you cannot relate to everyone. Trust your gut. If you cannot make them happy, they will probably make you unhappy. You may need to consider walking away from that future problem client.

Learn to really listen – We lawyers are notoriously bad listeners. We love words, especially our own. However, as said by Phillip Stanhope, the Earl of Chesterfield: “Many a man would rather you heard his story than granted his request.” It is a tremendous gift to be listened to and with the fast-paced world we live in, things like texting, e-mails, Twitter and cell phones prevent listening, and everyone can and does talk at once. Communication is fast, but rarely very satisfying. Do things differently, at the first meeting with your new client (and every meeting after that), clear your calendar, ignore the phone and just listen.

Under promise and over deliver - Be realistic about things you can do, and the time frames in

which you can do them. Factor in delays and results you cannot always control. If you say it will take a day and it takes three days, you are late. If you say five days and it is three days, you are amazing. It’s the same three days, but an entirely different perception. Clients remember what you said, so don’t over promise. It makes you seem untrustworthy.

Read what they read - There are all kinds of tools available online that allow you to monitor social media and other resources for information about your client and their industry. Share this information with your client. It may or may not be useful in the current matter, but more importantly, it lets your client know that you are watching out for them in a bigger way and actually care about their business success.

If you want a client, put yourself in their shoes – Know and understand the broader goals that the client may be trying to accomplish and what their business needs are. Keep those in mind as you represent them and strive to serve those needs.

Make your staff part of the client service team – Your staff is your safety net and if you are a busy lawyer, they often are the ones who talk to the client when he or she calls. Keep staff in the loop and train them to show the client how important they are to you. They can spot problems brewing that you might miss and even help you avoid them.

Be user friendly - Make your office, your staff and even you “user friendly.” It is important that the client be put at ease and be comfortable in your office. Make them feel welcome just like you strive to make a guest in your home feel welcome. This could include showing them around, offering them a conference room in which to work, or having their favorite coffee or soft drink available for them when they visit.

If your client isn’t paying, pick up the phone and ask why – There are typically three reasons a client is not paying your bill: one, they have no money; two, they are a deadbeat and don’t like to pay for services rendered; or three, they are mad about something and giving you the silent treatment. If the first two scenarios are the case, you may need to withdraw and with the third, you may be able to fix the problem. Call them and ask if there is a problem.

Be the bearer of all news, good, bad or indifferent – Be communicative on everything about their case. Never make the client have to call and ask what is going on with their case. Believe me, it is never a good sign when they have to call and ask. Sometimes that will mean calling to say something like, “The case cannot progress because the judge is tied up in a big trial,” or “We are waiting for this witness to be available for deposition.” They may not like the news but they expect you will take the initiative to keep them posted without them having to call you. When you keep them posted, clients usually don’t blame you for adverse developments.

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