

The Art of Maintaining Client Relationships During Times of Crisis

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As our inboxes experience a surge of emails and subtle marketing messages, we wonder whether many companies now see 'being commercial' as the new definition of 'being professional'. Many of us are experiencing a sudden lack of work due to the current global pandemic; however, this presents an opportunity for us to genuinely connect with our clients and colleagues. As firm believers in nurturing relationships, we write this piece to share our views on connecting with others on more empathetic grounds amidst these testing times. If you're curious about how some lawyers are still finding fresh mandates amidst the lockdowns and standstill of economic activity, read on.

A lot has changed globally over the past few weeks. We are witnessing unprecedented times and none of us was prepared to fight the global outbreak of this pandemic that has left several nations across the globe amidst a lock-down. Most of us are under a house-arrest and are now serving our clients from home. Thanks to technology, we have been connected like never before. A lot of organisations, as well as individuals, have explored totally new ways of working from home. That being said, things are not the same for everyone. A lot of our friends from the legal fraternity have witnessed a sharp decline in their work – firstly, because the courts have either suspended their operations or are only functioning specifically to cater to urgent matters; secondly, because economic activity is at an all-time low. A lot of us who have been yearning to have some free time to explore hobbies, now have a break from our otherwise hectic schedules and finally have down time. However, as time passes, many are now finding it difficult to find new ways to pass the time. Legal services providers, particularly, are finding it difficult to cope with this sudden 'free time' that has been bestowed upon them. Therefore, most of them are either finishing up their pending drafting work or are catching up on reading about things like evolving laws and upcoming industry sectors. Several others are interacting online more frequently than before with both clients and fellow members of the legal fraternity.

Empathize and Engage with your Clients

We have frequently been asked by colleagues from the legal field about what they should be doing during this time to ensure that they not only make productive use of this situation but also reach out to the fraternity on a larger scale. As firm believers in nurturing relationships, we give only one piece of advice to our lawyer friends: This is the perfect time to empathise with your clients and engage with them. This is an opportunity to go the extra mile for your clients and connect with them not only on commercial pursuits but also on a personal level. By doing so, you will gain even more of your clients' trust and confidence. It is helpful in build long-lasting relationships to reach out to your clients in a selfless and serving manner. Have you picked up the

phone and asked your clients how the outbreak of this pandemic has hit them commercially? Have you asked them how they plan to cope with the sudden lockdown of economic activity? Have you asked how you can help them build a contingency plan? If the answer to one or more of these questions is yes, you know the difference between 'practicing law' and 'the business of practicing law'.

Extend a Helping Hand

We do understand that some of your clients may not be in a position to afford the fees of a lawyer at this time. Cost-cutting is the new normal and every penny saved does make a difference. But we do have a question: If you don't reach out to your clients now when they likely need you most, why would you expect them to reach out to you when things go back to normal?

Some of us are making a big mistake by not extending a helping hand. If you've billed your clients in the past and have good professional ties with them (that have lasted for years in some cases!), then this is your time to pay back to those relations. Reach out to your clients and ask them what kind of help you can offer to them. Just like you, they may also be struggling with their contracts and agreements. Perhaps suggest reviewing any contracts or agreements that may be in question and offer to assist them in understanding those further. This is the time for you to offer to review their business plans and explain to them the legal aspects they need to bear in mind, while keeping in mind the sensitive business environment. This is also an opportune time to help them and their team members with online workshops/sessions on technical skill-development and legal knowledge enhancement.

Look Beyond Commercial Aspects

Endeavour to maintain a constant connection with your clients and check in on several developments as each day unfolds. As a service provider, one of your primary duties is to keep your client informed of the steps taken by legislature and judiciary, especially pertaining to areas of practice that may concern them. Take this time to study the upcoming laws that may affect your client's businesses in the times to come and get yourself abreast with the latest legal developments. As business and law cannot be practised in isolation, utilise this free time to enhance your commercial acumen, especially related to the industry sectors to which your clients belong. At this time, when most businesses are contemplating a cost reduction to remain sustainable, legal fees should be the last thing that you should be discussing with clients. Of course, we do understand that at the end of the day we are all running a commercial venture and sustainability is as much an issue for you as it is for them. But that's what differentiates a service provider from a trusted advisor. If you can help them sail through these challenging times, you can impress them, and most importantly build a relationship that will last for a lifetime.

Engaging with clients with the intent to resolve their issues and digging deeper to understand the practical challenges they may be facing right now is more impactful than sending them mere cut-copy-paste messages and business-promotion emails. Your communication at this point in time has to be strategic, well thought out and definitely not something that appears to be driven by commercial intent. If you need to go out of your way to make your clients feel welcomed at this point in time, please do so.

Gestures that Count

Are you wondering how some lawyers are still able to get new mandates and fresh instructions from their clients, even amidst this lockdown and general slack in the economic activity? It is because in order to build a successful practice, these lawyers are also working hard to build an ongoing relationship with each client. Such relationships survive long after the first agreement or mandate signed with a client. In these challenging times, and otherwise, never take your attorney-client relationship for granted. Even if you call your clients or engage with them just to say 'hello' and have a brief conversation with them, trust me they will feel valued. Small gestures like this will go a long way in building the perception of a dependable protector in the minds of your client. Such a client may not react well to a sales pitch, but they will at the very least be formulating a (likely positive) opinion of you. If you specialise in a particular practice area, try and explore participating in online/virtual events. This will show that you are reliable and assist in impressing your clients. Sharing passion and commitment for the work that you do will bring progressive changes to the field right now. This further strengthens clients' perceptions on how much you care about the fraternity as a whole; and not just your individual legal practice.

Conclusion

It is hard to over-emphasize the value of building on relationships. Lawyers and law firms give a lot of thrust to business development. However, in that process, the relevance and importance of client retention can sometimes become somewhat diluted. It is also equally important, especially during the tough times all of us are witnessing today, that existing clients are valued and taken care of. What might today be a simple day-to-day consultation on simple issues could possibly in time evolve into open communications, matter updates, advice on business decisions and joint engagement in community-level activities

with your clients. The silver lining to these troubled times is the opportunity they offer to grow new relationships and to be there for your current clients.