

Analysis

5 Ways Law Firms Can Harmonize Client Service

Share us on: By [Aebra Coe](#)

Law360, Grand Rapids (August 10, 2017, 8:25 PM EDT) -- Law firms often fail to consistently deliver the services in-house legal departments depend on, with a single attorney or group sometimes exceeding expectations only to watch as others disappoint.

When law firms don't create a consistent experience for corporate clients from one matter to the next, or from one office to the next, experts say the dangers are many — the firm could miss out on potential efficiencies of scale or fail to take advantage of cross-selling opportunities, and clients may become loyal to an individual attorney rather than the law firm itself, or even throw up their hands and find a new firm.

“Inconsistency in quality between offices and practice groups is one of the most common complaints from clients,” said [Jaap Bosman, principal partner of TGO Consulting](#). “Over the last few years, many law firms have come up with various forms of client service programs. Despite the fact that most of these programs are drafted by clever consultants and make perfect sense from a rational point of view, they largely fail in long-term execution.”

A recent report by [BTI Consulting Group](#) found that when asked what single factor contributed to a client recommending a law firm to a peer, just over 54 percent of general counsel polled said superior client service, whereas just over 30 percent cited the next most popular factor, expertise. And the report found 60 percent of clients replaced one of their primary law firms in 2016.

For subscribers only

Here, experts detail five ways firms can successfully harmonize client service.

Use Leadership to Create Unity

A law firm culture that embraces a firmwide sense of unity — with firmwide clients, firmwide documents and forms, and cases that belong to the law firm — is the best way to achieve consistency across practice groups and offices, according to John Remsen, founder of The Remsen Group.

But lawyers love autonomy, and insisting they do things a certain way can create pushback, he said.

The mindset of many partners is that “no one is going to tell me how to run my practice or how to deal with my clients,” he said. Creating a law firm environment where that frame of mind is minimized comes down to leadership, according to Remsen.

“Leadership is required and accountability is required to enforce firm policies,” he said.

A unified culture can also be created through education, according to Mary Ellen DeWinter, a senior adviser at GLC Law Firm Consulting Group.

“Firms can introduce training programs and other resources to support and reinforce a more client-focused culture and incorporate these expectations across firm offices, departments and daily processes,” DeWinter said.

Change Up the Management Structure

Without the right management structure, continuity cannot be possible, according to Jack Bostelman, a partner of consulting firm [Blaqwell Inc.](#)

In order to build consistency, law firms should create dedicated client teams composed of partners and senior associates from all the key practice areas clients use, Bostelman said.

Additionally, leadership should make sure practice groups are managed without regard to the office locations of group members, and there should be no interference in practice group management by partners who are office heads, he said.

Once that structure is in place, the firms’ client teams can hold periodic meetings to coordinate regarding the work currently being done for their shared clients, share information about what clients like and dislike about firm services, and develop strategies for improving client service and obtaining more business — or a better mix of business — from clients, he said.

Define a Set of Standards

Inconsistency of client service is a “big and growing problem” in law firms, said BTI Consulting Group President Michael Rynowecer.

“Most law firms rely on individual partners or client team leaders to define client service levels. While these partners know the client best and can fine-tune the client service activities, the firms with the most consistent service across offices define certain client-facing behaviors and actions which set the minimum client service standard at a high level,” Rynowecer said.

For subscribers only

Rynowecer suggested law firms define a set of firmwide expectations regarding client service by assigning a single partner to be accountable for client service delivery for each major client; holding client team meetings regularly to discuss client service performance; developing a client preference file for all attorneys to study and learn about client-specific performance requirements; and asking clients to identify any special reporting needs, staffing preferences and invoicing preferences as part of the client intake process.

“The most aggressive firms hold a partner accountable for making sure these things all happen on a routine basis,” he said.

Be More Like [McDonald's](#)

When it comes to commoditized legal work, Remsen suggests law firms look to McDonald's for inspiration.

For subscribers only

“Clients want efficiency, a low price, and certainly if you're doing the same thing over and over again, you should get pretty good at it and pretty efficient at it, and it's a good idea to standardize across offices, practice groups and lawyers,” Remsen said.

By streamlining processes and documents across all offices, law firms can lower their prices even further on commodity work because they're not “reinventing the wheel” each time, he explained.

The goal is for partners, associates and paralegals to understand that all cases should be handled a specific way through a given set of procedures, he said.

Rethink Partner Compensation

Law firms' compensation models can often be a hurdle to streamlined client service, according to **Bosman**.

"The fact that, due to the compensation model, partners are inclined to look after their own book of business before looking after the broader interests of the firm, forms one of the bigger obstacles towards seamless and uniform client service delivery," he said.

A simple way to improve is by changing the ways partner performance is measured, he said.

"If less emphasis is placed on a partner's personal book of business and profitability and more on a partner's measurable contribution on the business of other practices and the firm as a whole, this will create an incentive to better cooperate across the firm on delivering the best possible service to the client," **Bosman** said.

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg and Brian Baresch.

Aebra Coe
Senior Reporter, Business of Law

