

We asked 100 Lawyers...

The survey results

Malcolm Wicks
SimplePlans

Why we did the survey

This project was started because we were invited to speak at a seminar for legal professionals on the topic of "Increasing profits through better understanding your clients". To make the presentation as highly relevant to the audience as we could we decided to better understand what Lawyers **thought** their clients really cared about. To find out what that was we practiced what we preach and asked them via one of our online surveys.

This paper is based on the responses from 100 legal professionals who we asked to answer our survey questions as if they were a client of their own firm. Other analysis is based on the presentation, our larger database of information and working with specific clients.

What legal practices want

Like most businesses legal practices would like a steady and growing stream of profitable revenue. The challenge for many firms is that increasingly clients are regarding legal advice as a commodity and are buying on price. Breaking this pattern is key to the success of each individual firm.

For many firms success is based on understanding and capitalising on the relationship they have with their clients. However, a client's definition of a good relationship and a legal firms definition is often very different.

Recently DLA Piper ran an advert in The Times with the headline: Tell me about the relationship with your lawyer. The text then went on to say: "It turns out there was no relationship. Most lawyers only do what is necessary, probably perfectly well..." Ouch, that is a very strong message. These are becoming very competitive times for the legal profession.

Customer surveys?

According to our survey just over 40% of legal firms carry out annual customer surveys. That leaves nearly 60% who don't. In our all industries benchmark nearly 75% of organisations do regular surveys.

We also discovered that many of the surveys carried out by law firms are often basic customer satisfaction surveys. They produce scores but often deliver little understanding of what clients really care about and therefore are not easy to act upon.

"Would you recommend us?"

We asked our 100 law professionals how they thought their own clients would respond if we asked them how they felt about recommending their law firm. Around 50% of lawyers thought that their clients would strongly recommend them. Compare this to our overall benchmark average of 27% and the fact that the highest average rating for any of our clients has been below 40%.

This difference in thinking between firms and their clients could have a very significant impact on projected future earning for some firms. The need is to really understand which of your client will strongly recommend you and crucially, why. It's then much easier to ensure that you continue doing what they like and to identify potential new clients who like the same things.

Why not?

It's equally important to understand those clients that say they would "only" recommend you. What do you need to do to convince them to move to the strongly recommend category? In our survey work we have typically found that clients who would "only" recommend tell us why in their comments and how they answer other questions. There are commonly about three questions where the average scores come in more than 20% lower than the average scores from those who would strongly recommend. The actual questions vary by client but these are the areas that firms need to put a priority on identifying and improving.

It's about the relationship

At a one to one level the client-lawyer relationship is typically very good and the expertise given highly valued. The pressures on the relationship occur outside of the times where client and lawyer are working closely together. The task is to identify where this is and what to do about it.

We asked our 100 lawyers how they thought their clients would rate them on an "easy to do business with" scale. The weighted score came in just 3% above the benchmark. But, should it be much higher for such a personal professional business where relationship counts for so much?

Keeping in touch

A key factor in the client-law firm relationship which does not get enough attention is keeping in touch. Our finding shows that law firms believe they are much better at keeping in touch than their clients think they are. Our 100 lawyers rated their ability to keep in touch at 87%. The average response on our benchmark is 75%. It seems that several firms may be a bit too optimistic about how their clients would rate them. One reason for this could be that, unlike the lawyers, clients are unclear about next steps and how long things normally take. It's therefore important to take this into account when working with clients and at least give them time estimates for next steps.

But why didn't you ask us?

We discovered that clients are interested in two different aspects of keeping in touch. The first is keeping in touch with what's going on during a case as described above. This causes significant client frustration. The second aspect of keeping in touch is between assignments. This ultimately causes frustration for the law firm.

Over time clients will "forget" the great lawyer who helped them resolve a serious issue. When they need more legal help they'll start looking for another law firm instead of coming back to the firm of that great lawyer.

Law firms who are good at keeping in touch are also much more likely to get recommended. This is true even if the original client only used them in a one-off situation. Most law firms need to review communications with current and previous clients.

Any comments?

An integral part of a good client relationship survey is the comments that your clients supply. Even if they are negative comments. The fact that clients took the time to write them down means that they care about you and want to help you improve.

In a well constructed client relationship survey the questions tell you what people care about and the comments tell you why. Sometimes in great detail. The skill is in combining these two sources of information, comparing it to the benchmark and then identifying the right course of action for your specific organisation.

Get personal

The most actionable survey for you will be tailored to your needs and sent to your clients. The results will almost certainly identify a few surprises concerning what your clients really care about. Here are a few real examples of comments that our clients have received:

- *I wish I could just phone you instead of booking an appointment (they already provided this service)*
- *I would use you more often if you had a car park*
- *I use you because you answer the phones quickly*
- *You have the best web site in the area*
- *I only realised that you also did family work when I saw toys in the conference room*
- *Your accounts department are rude*
- *This is the first time you have ever contacted me*
- *I'm still with you because you agreed to meet me at my office instead of yours 5 years ago.*
- *We support the same local charity*
- *When Mary Jones goes I'll follow her*
- *You were recommended by my hairdresser*
- *Please fix your air conditioning*

I wonder what your clients would tell you in a structured client relationship survey?

Malcolm Wicks

SimplePlans

Helping organisations profit by being customers focused

Contact information:

Malcolm.Wicks@simpleplans.co.uk

0118 989 1107 0781 394 6021 www.simpleplans.co.uk

