

GCs Describe what they *Like* about their Lawyers

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There are a lot of points that corporate general counsel like about their law firms, and they are all pathways to getting more business for their lawyers. They all turn on what retailers call “good customer service.” These behaviors include offering alternative fees, having an effective website, going the extra mile, offering better rates and knowing the client’s business.



Larry Bodine

None of these tactics are surprises, except for the fact that many law firms don’t use them. Most law firms offer excellent legal skills, and having them is no longer a point of distinction. GCs expect it. Following are several ways that lawyers distinguish themselves and land more work from corporate clients.

Be responsive and accessible.

- “I think about individual lawyers, not firms. Certain lawyers have given me fantastic results and personal attention. If I call my lawyer at Perkins Coie, he’ll call back within 2-3 hours, even though he’s traveling all across the country. I’ll get exactly what I need to know right away,” said Jeffrey Reeser, Assistant GC at Newmont Mining Corporation in Greenwood Village, CO. The company uses 300 law firms.
- “My favorite law firms will not only tell me about news that affects my company but also tell me they can tailor it to my concerns. They see the hoop before I do and jump through it themselves,” Reeser added.

Know the client’s business:

- “For me it was a pleasant surprise when a partner would talk about what we’d need to get done, and would stay on the line and ask questions about what they saw in the headlines, or what other business challenges I was facing. They took

the time to be inquisitive – and we had a fixed fee so it didn't cost me anything. It's been very exciting to me. These are busy people and they'll slow down to take an interest in me – it turns into a lot of business for them. They'll say we have appellate skills we can help you with. They make small talk about what else is going on in the company," said Julie DeCecco, Associate GC and Director of Litigation of Oracle. Her company uses 100 law firms.

- "When you as a lawyer do understand more about our firm, there's a great cross marketing opportunity," said Eric Hilty, AIMCO apartment investment, a REIT in Denver. The company uses 100 law firms. "Lawyers and marketing people should envision putting themselves in our shoes. We're in real estate industry, our stock price is down and we've had layoffs. Think about what that means. Try to envision what the clients are going through and it'll help you discover how to meet those needs."



Eric Hilty

Your website should display what GCs want to see.

- "Your websites are very important," said Carmel Gill, Corporate Counsel of Level 3 Communications of Broomfield, Colorado. Her company uses 150 law firms. "Put in the lawyer's areas of expertise or I won't hire them. Put in everything your lawyers do. If your website is good, I don't need your slick marketing materials. When I choose a lawyer, I ask (a) do they have the expertise? And (b) do I like working with them?"
- "Nothing is worse than a cheesy bio," Hilty said. "the first link shouldn't be 'Cases are not won on luck alone...'" this tells me you're cheesy, but it doesn't tell me anything else about you."



Carmel Gill

Go the extra mile.

- "We lost a motion for summary judgment in New York. Our outside counsel asked if we wanted to appeal. I said 'no, we'll never get that overturned.' He said, 'I am so confident I can get it overturned that if we lose -- it's on me. If I succeed, you can pay me what you want.' He got it overturned and got it affirmed. I gladly paid him because he saved us a lot of money and time because he was willing to take that risk. The next time we have a case in that jurisdiction we'll go back to

that lawyer,” Hilty said.

Build relationships with people at the client.

- “What I like is partner putting me in touch with other resources. For example, partner will say ‘there’s this conference I’m going to on the topic we’re talking about and you can come as my guest,’ Gill said. “The relationship is the key. Encourage the lawyers to meet people, not to market, but to get to know the people. Lawyers should find out what activities the people are in-house are involved in, what boards they’re on, and get involved in them so they can develop that personal relationship.”
- “When I have a big enough case, I’ll get a bunch of names and interview the lawyers face to face -- just to interact with them and get their ideas on the case. It was great for me; I’d met and gotten confidence in the other lawyers,” Hilty said.

If you’re at a small firm, offer a lower fee.

- “I’ve seen firms in the heartland with very low rates and their service is great,” Hilty said.
- “If matter is run of the mill, we’ll go to a less expensive firm than the big firm we ordinarily use,” Gill said.

Put extra effort into RFPs

- “As you feel in responding the RFP, I feel in drafting it. Sometimes we get robotic response. Sometimes they’re not highly tailored. Sometimes I feel like I need to hire a lawyer just to read the RFP. I don’t like these responses and don’t use the law firms,” Reeser said.
- “Law firms are getting better at RFPs,” DeCecco said. “Firms are clearly putting in a lot of work to create a customized, tailored RFP. They present a very careful analysis and show how the firm would approach the case, the venue and the judge. What also jumped out at me was that law firms offer alternative fee arrangements (AFFs) and had specific proposals for them -- as opposed to firms that just said, ‘we’re happy to talk with you about AFFs.’”

Alternative fee arrangements (AFFs)

- “I’m a convert to AFFs. Now, we typically ask for alternative fees right up front on every matter. We’re seeing a lot more value. We get less hung up on amount of time that was spent on a particular motion, or the staffing on a case, or whether they had someone too junior on the case. We’re feeling much more satisfied that we’re getting value through AFFs. We’ve had a lot of success, building trust on both sides, we feel like we’re all on the same page. They trust that if they take a loss on something, there will be a lot more additional work. We trust that they’re staffing cases right and using top caliber people.
- “You have to try AFFs. One firm offered us a bank of hours that we could prepay. At the end of the year they would suggest things we could do to use up the hours,” Gill said.
- “If an AFF is working right, it could be something as simple as a contingency fee. We don’t worry about who’s getting the short end of the stick. We’ll use success fees: we’ll pay you 60% up front and if you get a good result we’ll pay a law firm 125% of their fees. If they don’t get a good result, they keep the 60%,” Hilty said.

To sum it up in two words: it’s all about customer service.

For more on this topic, call:
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