



AND THE ART OF LEGAL NETWORKING

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INSIGHTS & COMMENTARY ON
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Turning Bad Experiences Into Good Client Service

BY LINDSAY GRIFFITHS ON JUNE 27, 2017



Today, I'd like to use a recent bad customer service experience to illustrate a couple of key points about client service:

- Listening to your clients may enable you to get at the root of the issue, and find a way to resolve it.
- Sometimes you can resolve an issue in a way that will strengthen and secure the client relationship, even if the client doesn't get what they want.

- Making every effort to solve an issue, even if you can't achieve the desired result, is sometimes sufficient to please the client.

Last year, I had the opportunity to use a dress rental company for a gala event. Everything about the rental and the return process went flawlessly, and I was so happy with the results, that I shared the experience with a number of people, especially anyone who complimented me on the dress that evening, and when they saw photos. I was sure I would rent from them again and many years into the future.

Fast forward to this year, when I wanted to rent another dress – I found the perfect one, and placed the order, only to realize that due to my travel plans (this time I'd be traveling out of the country) and a holiday weekend, I'd need an extension. According to the site, I could extend the rental by a day or two as long as the dress wasn't already booked for another rental.

Following an online chat exchange with the company, the end result is that they wouldn't allow me to extend the rental. The salient points:

- Before they realized that there was a holiday weekend involved, they were willing to move the delivery date to that Monday, which indicated that there probably was some wiggle room in return deadline. But once the rep realized there was a holiday, he set a hard refusal to extend the deadline, even though the later delivery date would have pushed the return date to what I needed.
- There was no offer to substitute a dress.
- There was no offer to ship the dress directly, even when I mentioned the date I would be wearing it.
- The overall message was, "here is your rental window, take it or leave it." So I left it.

I further complained on Twitter to the company, and mentioned the above points, and their message remained the same. So I won't be renting from them again, or recommending them to anyone I know – in fact, I'll be recommending *against* them.

If you're worried, I managed to find the exact dress I wanted to rent for sale on eBay, and bought it, for cheaper than the rental would have been – and I wore it happily to my event.

So what are the lessons here for lawyers and law firm professionals when working with clients?

Listen for the message behind the message

We all know that listening is pretty much essential for great client service, so I know that's not news. But how well are we doing it?

In my example, I needed two things:

- To be heard.
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- To reach some kind of resolution.

To the first point, I didn't feel as though the service rep was listening to me or cared about my problem, and he probably didn't. Using some pointed and open-ended questions would have allowed him to identify what it was I really needed in this situation, which was the second point – to reach a resolution. I needed a dress for this event, and time was running out. I'd gotten my hopes up about this one particular dress, but if he'd done some digging, perhaps he could have found an alternative or at least made me feel as though he'd exhausted every avenue. This type of customer service *does* exist in retail – I think of Zappos, who empower their employees to go the extra mile for their customers to the point where they will even order from competitors' sites in order to please them. That type of service instills rabid loyalty.

I have seen that happen with lawyers and law firms too – if someone doesn't have the right expertise for a particular matter, they'll bring in another partner, and sometimes another firm, so that the interests of their client are properly served. And whether it's a small matter or bet-the-company litigation, are you listening to your clients, asking the probing questions, and finding out what the true fears and frustrations are behind what they're voicing, so that they feel both heard and that you're working towards a resolution? Are you sure that with each and every matter, you're inspiring rabid loyalty among your clients?

You can't always get what you want...but did you get what you need?

Not every story has a happy ending.

However, you can preserve a client relationship and sometimes even strengthen it, even when things don't go your way. It seems crazy, but it's true. Let's say for a moment that I believe that the dress really was booked for another rental right after mine, and the rep legitimately couldn't extend the rental. If he had considered any other possible solution, and we had worked through some additional options, I would have been more satisfied than I was.

It's possible that the end result would have been that I wasn't able to rent a dress from them for this occasion, but I would have felt that we'd tried all the various possibilities, and just weren't successful. Rather than blaming the company for a lack of effort, I would have blamed the circumstances (and to be clear, I don't blame the rep in this case; I blame bad policies and a lack of employee empowerment by the company).

Not every matter is going to be resolved in your client's favor, and not every answer you have for them will be the one that they want to hear. But when you're able to provide them with options and with the best case scenario, given the set of circumstances that you have in front of you, a reasonable person will understand that you've done the best you can. They'll feel that you've taken the first point into account, and listened to them and their needs, and tried to develop a suitable solution.

In these cases, communication is key. I have found that more often than not, when people think you're going to be disappointed with what they have to tell you, they avoid telling you anything. People would rather avoid you than give you bad news – and this is just as true in business as anywhere else in life. Unfortunately, not knowing is far worse, and does more damage to a relationship (even a professional one), than ripping off the band aid and giving someone the bad news. Once you have the full facts about something, you can move on from it, and make the decisions that you need to. It also helps to build trust in the relationship – yes, even bad news. It should, of course, be carefully delivered. But delivered nonetheless.

So, if it is the case that the dress rental company simply doesn't offer extensions, they should make this clear on their site. I wouldn't have rented the dress in the first place, and while I would have been disappointed, I would have been happy to rent from them again. And had they worked with me to find other solutions, even if it wasn't the one I wanted, I would have felt that they valued my business and wanted me as a future customer.

Are you ensuring that you're communicating effectively with your clients, even the bad news, in a way that's quick and effective and shows them that you've worked through all the possible scenarios to offer them the solutions that make you the best partner for them? Every interaction we have with our clients, even when it's uncomfortable, is an opportunity to show them how we add value. And in the moments when it is particularly difficult, those are the moments you can really shine and strengthen the bonds of those relationships even further.

Work hard, then work harder

Tying together these two points, the idea of needing to be heard and feeling like you've exhausted every solution even if the result isn't what the client wants, is the notion that however things shake out, you want to believe that this company, this firm you're working with cares as much about your problems as you do.

The legal industry has changed dramatically over the last decade, and one of the biggest shifts has been the move towards “lawyer as partner” to their clients. Lawyers are invested in the outcomes and really care about the relationships that they've cultivated. They want to know about their clients' businesses, the challenges that they're facing, and the ways that they can make their lives easier. Clients really want to feel that lawyers care. This is communicated in all sorts of ways, of course, both when things are going well and when things are more challenging.

In my story, had the rep gone through the various options I had and asked me questions such as “is there anything else I can do?” or “how might we be able to fix this?” I would have felt as though he cared about my situation, and wanted to help me resolve it. Even if the end result was that I didn't rent a dress, I would have felt that the company cared and tried to make it right.

Instead, I was left feeling that they didn't care about my business, that I was just another number to them, and that they were arrogant enough to believe that their success would protect them from outliers like me (when I

think we all know that “outliers” can very quickly become the norm when client service isn’t a priority). And that cemented not only my decision not to rent from them this time, but also never to rent from them in the future, and also to spread the word about how unprofessional I think they are.

Statistics show that most clients don’t complain; they just leave. And when someone has a bad client service experience, they’re more likely to share that experience than when they have a good one. However, the good news is that when you turn a difficult situation around, the majority of clients will stay with their current provider instead of leaving, because the relationship is strengthened.

Constantly and rigorously emphasizing that you’re listening to them, you’re looking for their best possible solution given the circumstances in front of you, and that you really care about the relationship and the outcome can help to turn even a difficult situation with your clients into a value-building opportunity.