

## Get to grips with client needs

By Linda M. Julian

Clients have needs and wants. Many complex, others relatively straightforward. Some needs they recognise, others they don't. Some wants they articulate, others are unspoken [but still wanted].

Sustainable success for law firms is founded on harnessing professional knowledge and skills to meet wants and needs of clients in ways which produce value for both parties: value which clients recognise and reward. Even better, value clients endorse by recommending or referring your services to others.

Core to this entire process is understanding what clients need and want.

Beyond old favourite techniques like having a chat, here is a small selection of ideas to explore to get a better grip on client needs.

### Understand how clients use your work

Come to a clear understanding about what happens to the work you do when you put it into the hands of your clients.

- How does your work impact that individual's KPIs or next management appraisal ?
- Who else in the organisation uses your work ?
- How does it fit into their production processes ?
- Who does what with it and when ?
- Where does your work end up ?
- What decisions or actions depend on your recommendations ?
- What could or should change in your work to make it easier for your client to use ?
- How could your client leverage more value from it ?

### Understand problems your clients confront

This happens at several levels - for business clients, from your front-line contact right through the organisational hierarchy.

By understanding the everyday problems or challenges faced by the individual with whom you deal, you'll get an important perspective on his/her individual needs within their organisation.

- How does your work impact that individual's KPIs or next management appraisal ?
- How much impact does it have on the bottom line of the business unit/s with which you deal ? Roll that all the way up to an enterprise-wide level.
- What are the pressures and challenges the organisation faces ?
- What are the problems your work is directed to managing or alleviating ?
- How significant is your work in the mix ?
- What is its ultimate impact on the enterprise ?

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### Understand what industry leaders are up to

Not all your clients will be at the forefront of their respective fields. It's worth a close look at how the "out there" industry leaders and others racing for market dominance use your work, or services similar to those you offer. Consider how industry leaders relate to expert professional service providers - and not just legal services.

Often, you can understand even more about the latent needs of your clients by seeing how their serious and successful competitors leverage value from their selected experts.

### Understand changes afoot

Get a handle on changes in the "big picture" - political, economic, social, technological - likely to impact your clients.

Legal and regulatory change, dynamics of financial markets and industrial cycles, population and lifestyle changes, and the state of knowledge and tools available to your clients to respond will all translate into new and different needs as well as changes it wants.

Each client's strategic planning horizon becomes your horizon in planning your business with them. If your client is on a two year strategic cycle, take your cue: rapid bottom line results for clients to plan 10 year horizons, your strategic view of your professional and business relationship needs to take a longer-term view.

### Understand what excites your clients

Comprehension of needs is incomplete without a clear grasp of those needs (or, more likely, wants) which matter to the point of creating some level of excitement about what it is you can do and/or how you can deliver it. Only by focusing on those factors which can take your service offering beyond merely "measuring up" will you understand how to differentiate yourself sufficiently to excite the right attention from your client - that is, attention sufficient to stimulate action.

Opening serious, in-depth conversations with clients about their needs and wants will arm you with essential information to respond appropriately and profitably for both parties, and to drive favourable decisions.

**About the author:** *Linda M. Julian is a director of Julian Midwinter & Associates, strategic practice development consultants to the legal profession. Nearly three decades experience working with legal practices throughout Australia, Asia, and the Pacific, place her in a unique position to advise on strategic management and practical business development issues. Her down-to-earth, pragmatic approach to the critical business issues facing the profession, combined with creative ideas and pragmatic advice, make her a popular conference speaker, regular contributor to professional journals, and an in-demand consultant and advisor.*