

How to murder a client relationship

By Linda Julian

An angry client is a problem to your professional practice. But consider for a moment: a disappointed client may be a much greater danger.

Dangerous disappointment

Disappointed clients rarely write angry letters, ring you to complain, or take the trouble to tell you what's wrong.

Instead, little by little, disappointed clients store up negative experiences, feelings of being badly done by or ignored.

They don't complain because they lack confidence in their ability, and your will, to address their problems.

As their expectations are dashed, bit by bit, disappointed clients disengage and eventually leave.

Lawyers must understand that the greater the prestige of their "brand", and the greater their service promise, the higher the probability of creating disappointment. That is, where reality falls significantly short of promise, the insidious problem of client disappointment festers.

These are the clients most likely to be your competitor's next "win".

Identifying and reconnecting with disappointed clients

This phenomenon is growing. As your marketing, promotion, and service promises improve, so client expectations grow. And, with them, the danger of reality falling short.

Here are some steps you can take to deal with this insidious danger to you and your firm and your future:

- use a range of client surveys to elicit feedback
- ensure surveys don't just ask clients to rate your services in absolute terms (fair, good, very good, excellent, etcetera) but that they ask about how the clients experience compared with their expectations
- interpret any rating less than "very good" as probable disappointment territory
- don't rest with ratings of "met expectations" from a client - at least an occasional rating of "exceeded expectations" is necessary to indicate that you're delighting (better still - thrilling !) a client once in a while
- **adopt the positive habit of asking clients, face to face, questions** like "are we meeting your expectations ?" and "what do you expect that I haven't yet done for you ?" - then listen quietly and patiently for the answer, and gently probe for more information
- always **show you care** about meeting client expectations - make sure they know that their satisfaction matters to you.

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Effectively identifying disappointment is the first step in reconnecting with these clients.

And, it's the first step in saving you and your firm from an insidious danger.

Angry clients are business opportunities

An angry client is not usually a threat to your practice.

If a client is sufficiently angry to make it visible to you - letters of complaint, phone complaints, angry feedback on client surveys - they probably have enough emotional attachment to you and/or your firm to care about restoring a good working relationship.

Our research - in line with other studies - reveals that only around 60% of clients who have a "negative surprise" bother complaining. Those who do generally believe that the problem can be fixed and have a measure of confidence that you'll resolve it for them.

Angry clients feel violated. They want retribution

So long as you can stay calm, work through the problem and handle the complaint well, the outcome is likely to be just as positive as if there hadn't ever been a problem.

In fact, some studies have shown that angry clients whose complaints are completely resolved, are likely to become strong word-of-mouth advocates for you. Qualitative research projects conducted by the Julian Midwinter Consulting team indicate that this is an important reality for lawyers.

You should always do your best work. But, on those occasions where you or your team have slipped up, be pleased that an angry client had enough concern for the relationship to put the energy into complaining. And, put your best foot forward to address and truly resolve the complaint - it's an important business development opportunity. Fiercely and frankly engaging the issue is the best way.

About the author

Linda Julian is acknowledged as a leading authority on strategic practice development and how to win business for law firms. Since 1979, she has consulted with lawyers and other professionals throughout Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific, and Asia on a wide range of business acquisition, client retention, and strategic management issues.

Her book *The Passionate Professional: creating value, success, and prosperity* has sold in 13 countries and has received wide acclaim. Linda lectures in strategic management and marketing professional services at post-graduate level. She leads the small and highly specialised Julian Midwinter & Associates consulting practice.