

Letters and the telephone - tools for selling your services

By Linda Julian

The telephone and letters are tools we all use constantly, but do we skilfully apply them to promote our services ?

Letters

A recurring theme in the course of 150 interviews we conducted with law firm clients was the unfavourable impression created by lawyers letters and calls. Here's what one client (\$60,000 per annum legal fees) said: *"In letters, my lawyer treats me like a stranger. Yet when we talk face-to-face, it's entirely different ... we're on friendly business terms."*

Selling your services is a lot harder if you deliver one set of messages face to face, and another when you write. Letters should have a **consistently friendly and businesslike tone**. Watch for the occupational hazard of reverting to a formal, distant, and even semi-adversarial style in client correspondence.

If you're on first-name terms, don't start with "Dear Sir", or worse still, "Dear Sir/Madam".

Wherever possible, **write in the first person**. (Irrespective of arguments about "we" reflecting the weight of the partnership, if it's on letterhead, a consumer reasonably assumes that it bears the imprimatur of the law firm.)

Adopt a **plain English style**: keep language simple. Sentences and paragraphs should be short. They should look easy to digest.

It's widely accepted that the *reading age of the average Australian is about ten years*: that is to say, **if a ten year old can't understand what you've written, chances are your average private client won't either**.

For business executives, average reading age is little better: twelve years. Businesspeople are swamped with paper - many already have far too much to read, and if your written communications are hard work to digest, chances are your proposal, report, or written advice won't receive immediate attention.

Rather than preparing a lengthy letter of advice, adopt a modern business style. You will convey your message better with a short covering letter, accompanied by a report.

A simple formula for report reader-friendly reports is:

- *introduction* or synopsis of the issue or problem
- material arranged under clear *headings and subheadings*
- *conclusions* drawn from your research
- bullet-point recommendations for action.

www.julianmidwinter.com.au

Tel +61 2 9968 4168
Fax +61 2 9960 4480

Suite 16 357 Military Road
Mosman NSW 2088
Australia

Email julianmidwinter@julianmidwinter.com.au

ACN 002 118 818

Space precludes exhaustive treatment of more client-friendly and persuasive written communications, but I suggest that an audit (preferably independent) of the letters, advices, and proposals emanating from your practice may yield significant insights into the success of your business development initiatives.

Telephone

US research reveals that up to *85% of lawyer/client contact is via the telephone*. It's probably much the same here. Do your practice a favour: take a hard look at your telephone system and how you use it.

Look especially hard at your own telephone style. You never get a second chance to make a first impression on a prospective client.

Answering by the third ring, and returning calls promptly is only a start to good telephone service.

Clients like to dial you directly, but that's not always practical. One layer is a sufficient barrier between you and your prospect or client: two layers is too much. If your calls are answered at reception, they should be transferred directly to you - not re-screened by your secretary.

If your calls are screened, make sure that you greet the caller using his/her name.

About the author: Linda M. Julian is a director of Julian Midwinter & Associates, strategic practice development consultants to the legal profession. More than twenty years experience working with legal practices throughout Australia, Asia, and the Pacific, place her in a unique position to advise on practical business development issues and marketing strategies. 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 and regular contributor to professional journals.

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When you leave a message, **reduce irritating telephone tag** by saying when you'll be contactable, along the lines of "He'll be able to reach me on 968 4168 until 1 o'clock, and then again after 8.30 tomorrow morning".

Don't eat while you're on the telephone, and if you like to talk "handsfree", make certain your handset is up to the job.

Dealing with an angry client on the phone is stressful - invest in a workshop to prepare professional and support staff to perform at these "moments of truth". There are several sources of telephone skills education, including Telstra who offer superb training for reception and secretarial staff.

Initiate a "Phantom caller" programme within your firm - it's the best way to discover the realities of the treatment clients, prospective clients, and referral sources receive at the end of the telephone.

Don't waste your money attempting to develop business through grand telemarketing schemes and sophisticated direct mail campaigns until you're sure that the fundamentals of everyday telephone and written communications with clients, prospective clients, and referral sources are right.