

## BUSINESS &amp; CAREERS

# The three questions to ask your clients now



THE HEADHUNTER

**WARREN SMITH**

I always find it interesting when service providers send us their client feedback survey. Often it is a four-page document, complete with sections, subsections, multiple choice questions, and additional space for comments. Sound familiar? The terrible irony is while I so rarely fill these out, our feedback form is slowly forming into an exact replica of these offending documents. This led me to question the nature and purpose of client feedback forms in the market.

In the legal industry it's clear law firms do not make client feedback as high a priority as their clients would like. And getting feedback is either done inconsistently, or is so extensive the client finds the exercise too time consuming to warrant their proper attention.

Here are three simple questions you should be asking your clients on a regular basis:

## 1. Would you provide us with a testimonial?

More powerful than asking "how are we doing?" and more useful for marketing than "what do you like about us," asking for a testimonial is an excellent acid test for the health of your client relationship. Not only do testimonials provide great ammunition for targeting similar clients in the market, they also offer an opportunity to gain key insights into your client relationship. If you are uncomfortable asking your client for a testimonial, consider what is holding you back. Are they a difficult client, or are you not providing the level of service you know you ought to be? Similarly, if you solicit a testimonial from your client and they are not prepared to provide one, take the opportunity to investigate what they feel is holding them back. Altogether, this is perhaps the most powerful question you can ask to gauge the strength of your client relationships.

## 2. How else could we assist you?

Sometimes, the key to See **Clients** Page 28

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## BUSINESS &amp; CAREERS

## Getting constant client feedback is important

## Clients

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expanding your relationship with your client is to simply ask the question. However, it is rarely enough to simply ask “how else can we assist you”: much like the expectations partners have on associates to anticipate needs when assisting on a file, the best approach with clients is to have a solid understanding of their business objectives and try to anticipate where their future needs may

be. As a trusted advisor, your ability to chart where your clients’ future legal needs may arise within the context of their growing business will help separate you from other more reactionary service providers. While you may not always know about a strategic acquisition they are quietly looking at, if you can demonstrate a keen insight into the goals and ambitions of the business owner(s), you give your team the best chance of expanding your relationship with your best clients.

## 3. Who else could benefit from our services?

Prompting the market for referral leads is a vital part of any growing practice. While nearly all lawyers appreciate the importance of asking this question, my experience is few actually do. More to the point, framing the question presumptively (as opposed to asking “do you know if anyone else could benefit from our services?”) puts the onus on the client to actively think about referrals, as opposed to the classic response of “certainly, let me think about it.” While clients are unlikely to introduce you to key competitors, they always have relationships with suppliers, business partners, friends, and other advisors outside their immediate market segment. This question is even more powerful if it follows your client’s provision of a testimonial: the introductory

email to the future client is essentially written the moment your client provides a testimonial.

Asking these questions as a scheduled part of your on-going client relationship maintenance will provide you with powerful insights into your clients, their views of your services, and opportunities to grow, not only with existing clients, but potentially with new ones as well. ■

*Warren Smith is a managing director with The Counsel Network, a lawyer recruitment and career consulting firm. He is also the only Canadian elected to the board of directors for the National Association of Legal Search Consultants (NALSC), a legal recruitment industry association.*

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## Standing out

## Branding

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times generic benefit statement contained therein.

## It’s business and it’s personal

The institutionalization of clients is always a priority for law firm management. Loyal clients provide a continuous revenue stream. But what occurs when a key partner moves from one firm to another with her/his “book of business” — where does the brand loyalty reside now? Brand loyalty may be a client reassurance at a law firm, but the relationship with an individual lawyer trumps it almost every time — I have seen it in the work I do setting up boutique firms and with coaching. The personal emotional attachment is mainly with the lawyer, not the firm. And that’s where the firm brand and the associated (monetized) loyalty start cracking at the seams.

## Don’t make me work for it

Why are boutique firms possibly the most effectively branded law firms? Perhaps it’s because they stand for something that’s easy to figure out. A computer is just a computer unless it’s an Apple. A Smart Phone is just a Smart Phone unless it’s an iPhone. Pretty much the same guts and software inside...

It’s up to the law firm to set the ground rules for what the brand stands for. And that’s not the statement: “We are different.” By and large, and with a number of notable and laudable exceptions, the conclusion can be drawn that many of Canada’s law firms are not so much strong individual brands as they are highly reputable less than differentiated commodity service providers with excellent name recognition.

## Functional vs. emotional

To turn the strategic wheel requires a leader with the vision to understand the requirements of a strong brand. Brand management is not just about building name awareness or ensuring that the name appears in the media or using superlatives to underscore expertise. Being good, no being excellent, is the price of entry to offer your services. Now what’s different? Perhaps more consideration should be given to creating and selling an experience — an emotionally driven experience. Soft stuff for tough, fact driven lawyers. ■

*Paul Kuttner is a principal of innovate! inc. Marketing and provides thought provoking marketing, sales and profitability support to law firms in Canada and the USA.*

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