



## Legendary service for your clients

*How can you become an indispensable source of value to your clients?  
Here's a simple and implementable blueprint for success.*

By Gerald A. Riskin

As far as I'm aware, it's no crime to offer such extraordinary legal service that clients become addicted to it. While it may be beneficial in some other industries, adding nicotine to the fee accounts or heroin to the agreements will do nothing to enhance the dependency of the client upon you and your firm.

Only one ingredient will do that, and it's not on any restricted list. It is, simply, "legendary client service."

How many minutes would it take, in a meeting among you and your partners, to fill five pages of a flip chart with concrete benefits that would accrue if you were known for providing legendary service?

- Would you get more or fewer referrals from existing clients?
- Would clients be more or less likely to pay your bills?
- Would clients be more or less likely to complain about the amount of your fees, the quality of your service, the time frames involved, and the outcome?
- Would you more likely or less likely be sued for malpractice?
- Would clients be more likely or less likely to appreciate you?

Well, then ... if the benefits are obvious, why is legendary service so rare? Because our profession is fraught with barriers and obstacles that discourage us from providing what we all know would be beneficial.

Even though there are notable exceptions to each of the challenges described below, most of us fall prey to a good number of them. Almost everything about the practice of law prevents legendary client service:

- Lawyers are trained in the law — not client relations. Sorry, but that means too many of us behave like geeks and not enough like caring providers.
- The billable hour is so sacred that non-billable activities are denigrated. We starve the client relationship in favor of getting another hour billed.
- Lawyers believe clients are focused only on solutions. We therefore get to the challenge at hand without worrying about optics.
- Clients are really focused on effort. We conceal most of ours.
- Lawyers bill in unimaginative ways (hours-based). We frequently either under-bill or over-bill.
- Clients will happily pay fees commensurate with the value of services offered. That would allow us to "afford" some client relations time.

How do you choose to whom you should provide legendary service? My mother, may she rest in peace, always told me, "Put your wife first." Good, sound matrimonial advice. If you want your marriage to last, you invest in your spouse and make him or her your sole focus.

But when it comes to clients, most of us are bigamists. We

simply don't stop at one! Unless you believe you put all your clients first, then I'm going to take a risk and advocate discrimination. (Don't worry, this sort of discrimination will not offend.)

Some may assert: "Nonsense! One must put *all* clients first." I do not yet understand all the principles of quantum mechanics, and therefore the multiple universe theory may support the notion that *all* clients *can* be first. For those who can execute this notion to perfection, my unqualified admiration. For the rest of us, we may need to narrow our focus.

To the mortals in our profession, I suggest that we prioritize a little. We have to decide who to really put first. This may be partially a dynamic exercise similar to a hospital emergency room — the patient seen first is not a function of comparing that patient to the universe of patients, but to the other patients in the emergency room at that instant.

Most law firms don't have ambulance entrances (no cheap shots, please). In the practice of law, our patients tend to be manifested by a creature called "File." Electronic or paper, this creature is a client surrogate with amazing powers.

The right file can cause physiological changes to us just by looking at it — tighten our stomach muscles, raise our heart and respiratory rates — just by catching our eye as we sweep a look over our credenza.

The file most resembles the emergency room patient when the client represented by the file deigns to phone or e-mail or fax (or, if Neanderthal, write). When this occurs, one might be required to do an on-the-spot assessment like our doctor friends.

However, between such "emergencies," we might consider prioritizing our clients this way. Feel free to shuffle the list — it's your judgment call, not mine — but I hope the criteria might be helpful:

- Clients who have the capacity to give us future work.
- Clients who will enhance our reputation simply by being associated with them.
- Clients who have the kind of work that forces us to continuously learn.
- Clients who are in industries we enjoy serving (and know something about).
- Clients who can afford to pay for the value we give them.
- Clients we like.

We might exclude those who are the corollary of these, including clients who feel it necessary to test the limits of ethics and propriety on every file. The clients who do not make it to your legendary service list should be treated well — but they may not deserve of you the time and effort that it takes to really make them "first" (like your spouse).

How can we practically provide legendary service? Now that



## Mettez-en plein la vue

Offrez un service « légendaire » et récoltez les fruits de vos efforts.

**N**ous savons tous que la prestation attentionnée et personnalisée de services rapporte mais nous avons tendance à l'oublier, préoccupés que nous sommes par la poursuite d'objectifs de facturation ou par l'urgence de solutionner les problèmes des clients (en oubliant d'entretenir avec eux des rapports étroits et cordiaux).

Pourtant, il suffit souvent de peu d'aménagements pour rendre certains clients dépendants de votre service et tout disposés à vous rétribuer pour la valeur que représentent vos services à leurs yeux.

Vous n'avez pas à traiter tous vos clients aux petits oignons. Un bon nombre peuvent se contenter d'un service correct, sans plus. Mais certains méritent les plus grandes attentions :

- ceux susceptibles de vous fournir du travail dans l'avenir;

- ceux dont le simple rapport avec eux suffit à aider votre réputation;
- ceux dont les besoins vous forcent continuellement à apprendre;
- ceux dont vous connaissez et appréciez le secteur d'activité;
- ceux qui peuvent se payer vos services;
- ceux que vous aimez.

Pour chacun de ceux-là, un service « légendaire » s'impose. Comment donner l'impression au client que vous le gâtez?

1. Visitez sa place d'affaires (même si vous devez prendre un avion).
2. Assurez-vous que vos collaborateurs connaissent par leur nom les principaux représentants du client.
3. Instaurez un système de réponse rapide
  - a. quelqu'un de votre équipe rappelle en moins d'une demi-journée;
  - b. le client peut vous joindre par cellulaire

- c. envoyez des rapports d'étape réguliers suivant la forme que le client préfère;
- d. écoutez le client pour déterminer ses préférences.

4. Tenez-vous au courant de son secteur d'activité.

- a. abonnez-vous à la publication d'affaires préférée de votre client et lisez-la;
- b. une fois par année, assistez avec lui à un séminaire portant sur son secteur;
- c. incitez le client à vous enseigner ce qu'il sait au sujet de son entreprise.

5. Parlez franchement d'honoraires et garantissez sa satisfaction.

N'hésitez pas et agissez! Si une seule de ces suggestions vous plaît, ne vous contentez pas d'y penser, appliquez-la. Et attendez de constater les résultats...

you've narrowed the field to those whom you are going to "spoil," you need to commit to spending *some* non-billable time on doing just that. Here is the starter list of five ideas that you can modify or add to:

1. Visit their place (even if an airplane is required).
2. Ensure your team knows the names of the client's key individuals.
3. Institute a rapid response procedure:
  - a. Respond within half a business day, maximum.
  - b. Give the client pager/cell/emergency contact options.
  - c. Send regular status reports in the form preferred by the client.
  - d. Listen to the client to determine such preferences and others.
4. Learn about the industry of the client.
  - a. Subscribe to the client's preferred business publication *and read it* (just one).
  - b. Attend the client's preferred industry seminar (just one annually).

c. Have the client in to teach you about his/her business.

5. Talk fees and fee arrangements and guarantee satisfaction.

Don't think too much and act too little! If this article has suggested a few ideas worth considering, it remains worthless unless and until you "execute" one of the ideas (just one) that appeals to you personally. Don't close the page on this article until you've thought of at least one thing you're going to *do* as a result of reading this.

When you have done that, you have joined the ranks of winners. Like Tiger Woods and Estée Lauder, they are not famous for what they have *thought*. They are famous for what they have *done*. •

.....  
**Gerald A. Riskin, B. Comm, LL.B., is a lawyer, former managing partner and member of Edge International, which consults to some of the largest law firms in the world. He can be reached at riskin@edge.ai or (800) 707-6449.**