

The Obstacles and Benefits of Client Satisfaction Surveys

By Jeffrey A. Miiller

Many lawyers would agree that a client satisfaction survey is a practical tool for strengthening client loyalty and bringing in more business. Still, many lawyers resist doing surveys because of deep concerns and assumptions that are untrue. If superior client service is the cornerstone of your practice, satisfaction surveys are a must. Therefore, it is important to recognize the obstacles that stop you from doing surveys, and to remind yourself of the profound benefits that surveys can bring.

First, let's tackle the obstacles:

Obstacles

Discomfort with hearing bad news.

One of the principle reasons most lawyers don't ask for feedback is because they do not want to hear criticism. You might argue, "*Why should I give my client the opportunity to complain?*" The answer is straightforward and undeniable; the cost of losing the client outweighs the discomfort of hearing bad news. It may be unpleasant to know there is a problem, but the sooner you know the better off you are.

Also, negative feedback, valid or not, can be constructive. A valid complaint provides an opportunity to salvage the relationship before it is too late. If, on the other hand, the client has an unrealistic expectation, you can set them straight. Negative feedback can also help you improve your service to other clients because problems with one client may indicate problems with others.

Another variation on this fear is, "*What if my client complains about something I don't want to change?*" By and large, it is unlikely that your clients are going to ask for something that is unreasonable. If a client does complain, it does not necessarily mean that you must make a change. For instance, if a client expresses a concern about rates, it means that they do not appreciate the value. The proper response is to not lower your rates, but rather communicate how the benefits you offer outweigh the cost to the client.

Assumption that you know your clients' attitudes.

Lawyers are notorious for this. "*I already know my clients are happy,*" they contend. The reality is you may be surprised to discover a flaw in your service. I see this happen frequently. I know an attorney who prides himself on being extremely knowledgeable about the manufacturing industry. It is his practice niche and he uses this claim to differentiate his services. Yet when he conducted client satisfaction surveys, he scored

very low marks regarding his manufacturing industry expertise. Many clients felt he was not as knowledgeable as he claimed. The attorney was oblivious to his clients' perception. To demonstrate a high level of expertise, he began to do seminars, publish articles and became active in the industry's largest trade organization. Now his clients have greater confidence in his industry knowledge. Had he not done the survey, he may have lost clients.

Concern that you appear weak.

Many lawyers erroneously believe that conducting satisfaction surveys is a sign of weakness. The concern is, "*Asking my client for their feedback makes me look unsure or subservient.*" This could not be further from the truth. Taking the time to check-in with your clients and responding to their feedback demonstrates confidence. It is a sign of integrity and it communicates a sincere desire to better serve them.

Benefits

One of the most effective techniques for overcoming the obstacles is to remind yourself of the benefits that surveys bring. Understanding the benefits will help you feel motivated to conduct client satisfaction surveys. Surveys:

Demonstrate that you value the relationship.

Many lawyers believe that doing good work, in and of itself, is enough. This is not true. In today's competitive legal market, it is crucial to remind your clients periodically that you are grateful for their business and are constantly striving to improve all aspects of your service. When you neglect to communicate that you are grateful for your client's business, you risk appearing cavalier about the relationship.

Help you spot problems before they undermine relationships.

Unless there is a complaint, many lawyers assume that clients are completely satisfied. The fact is, dissatisfied clients rarely complain. This is due to one of two reasons; either the client is not clear *why* they are unhappy, or they are clear but they are uncomfortable bringing up the reason(s). As a result, unspoken dissatisfaction festers and can severely weaken loyalty. Eventually, and usually to the surprise of the lawyer, the client leaves. So, it is imperative that you periodically get detailed feedback from your clients to identify problems, if any.

Provide an opportunity for clients to articulate their experience.

This is a powerful concept. When satisfied clients express their thoughts and feelings out loud it helps them get clarity about the value they are receiving. Moreover, at that moment, they are crafting dialogue which they can use to recommend your services to others.

For dissatisfied clients, hearing their own thoughts can bring their discontent into perspective. It is not unusual to hear survey participants respond, "You know, now that we're talking about it, I realize that I've overreacted," or, "I realize my expectation here

is a little unrealistic.” Simply providing an opportunity for your clients to express their feelings will help you diffuse problems and align expectations.

Another important thing to mention is that I believe we all have a fundamental human need to express ourselves. You are serving this need by doing a satisfaction survey. Often, you will hear clients express that they appreciate being asked for their feedback.

Enhance accountability.

Where several partners and/or staff have interaction with a client, it is important to confirm that everyone is meeting their responsibilities. For example, a mid-size law firm surveyed their most profitable clients, and the results revealed that although they were very satisfied with most of the work and staff, several clients had singled out one partner who was not responsive and had an abrasive personality. Their experience with this attorney was so unpleasant that two of the clients had already begun to interview other law firms. As a result of doing satisfaction surveys, the firm uncovered a problem they were otherwise unaware of, and was able to repair the problem and save their accounts.

Help you clarify your differentiation.

Many lawyers are at a loss when asked, “What specific standards make your service different from and superior to the competition?” Creating a survey questionnaire forces you to identify your service standards. For example, you could design your survey to ask about your responsiveness, or your creativity, or any other qualities that you believe distinguish you from the competition. Integrating such client input can greatly enhance your differentiation.

Help you maximize your profitability.

Satisfaction surveys can uncover other client needs. An example of this is the client who, while answering a survey question, realizes that they would like to have a quarterly meeting with their lawyer to discuss their company’s goals. Satisfied clients will routinely say, “*Well, I know they (law firm) do other things but they haven’t told me what other services they could be providing.*” Ending your survey with an open-ended question, such as “*What can we do to be of better service to you?*” is a highly effective technique to identify other opportunities to expand your service.

There is no question that positive survey results provide an opportunity to cross-sell additional services. What’s more, lawyers, once they receive glowing feedback, feel more comfortable asking for testimonials and referrals.

The reason for a client’s dissatisfaction may seem trivial to you. However, your client’s perception *is* their reality. And it benefits you to know where their head is at so you can respond accordingly. Often, it is a minor error or a one-time miscommunication that sticks with the client and festers into resentment. Pinpointing problems, getting them out in the open and candidly discussing them can heal the damage before it is too late, and also strengthen the emotional bond with your client.