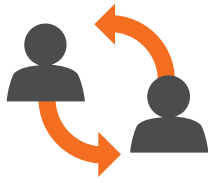




Building a client-centric law firm: Client engagement for the modern practice



Clients want relationships with their law firms that extend beyond legal outcomes.

What do legal clients want? In today's market, typically it's more than just legal services.

Put another way: They don't want to be treated simply as clients. They don't want to be seen solely as a transactional entity that pays for services provided. They want and need more valuable, more meaningful interaction with the firms they engage to handle their legal work.

Clients want relationships with their law firms that extend beyond legal outcomes. They want and need a firm that sees the big picture, one that understands how its work fits into the entirety of their clients' businesses. More and more, they want their legal representatives to be partners, particularly if that client is a larger business with multiple, often overlapping needs. And they want to be seen as people, not solely as "customers."

Providing this kind of relationship is becoming a fact of life for firms of just about any size. And it requires firms to look closely at client engagement—how they work with their clients, and how they maintain profitable connection with them.

For a small practice, client engagement often comes quite naturally. In most cases, those clients are individuals or small businesses with just a handful of executives (sometimes just one or two owners). This makes it relatively easy to treat clients very personally. After all, you're dealing with an individual, not a sprawling entity. For larger firms, client engagement is more challenging. Clients can feel lost amid a bureaucracy of partners, paralegals, and other staff.

That noted, smaller firms have client engagement challenges of their own. And larger ones benefit from capabilities that can allow them to be exactly the kind of client-centric business partner their clients seek. Either way, as firms of all sizes adjust to the changes in the legal industry, some imperatives remain consistent:

- Add more value
- Deliver services as efficiently as possible
- Help clients' in-house law departments optimize their own efficiency
- Differentiate your firm from competitors and their services

At a glance, most of these imperatives fall particularly upon larger firms. But regardless of your firm's size and how strong its current client interactions, there will always be room for improvement, if for no other reason than technological capabilities and client demands are always evolving.





Customer service is built around prompt, helpful responses to contacts and requests.

Elements of client engagement

So what is client engagement? Perhaps the best way to define it is by identifying its elements. The foundation of any client engagement strategy is competently performing the basic customer service that applies to solo practices and large global firms alike. Customer service is built around prompt, helpful responses to contacts and requests. This is the type of care and attention any of us would wish to receive from a service provider or vendor.

But again, that's just a starting point. Client engagement goes well beyond customer service. From there, as we've noted, a firm's approach to client engagement will vary depending on that firm's size and practice—and significantly, the digital tools in its toolbox.

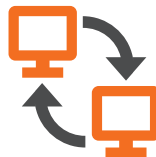
That's because so much of client engagement involves communication. And more and more of the communication between clients and firms takes place online. The challenge is to take an impersonal experience—that is, one that doesn't involve face-to-face or voice-to-voice communication—and make it personal. The experience your firm creates for a client, even via digital channels, should keep them in mind as a person. What are their needs and expectations? How can you make them feel at ease when working with you via a digital platform?

You can categorize these experiences and capabilities from basic to more advanced, bearing in mind that "advanced" casts no judgment on the quality of a firm's work: Smaller firms often don't need to deliver the "advanced" level of digital client experiences that large global firms or firms with distinctive specialties must provide.

With that in mind, let's place some of the more familiar digital interactions on a basic-to-advanced spectrum:



Digital communication. The baseline of digital interaction. Technology at this level typically is used for common tasks like electronic signatures, online billing, and basic digital communication such as email or chat.



Remote access to shared files and documents. This stage of client engagement relies on a wide swath of technology, from simple consumer-grade experiences like Dropbox™ to common business-specific applications like Microsoft® SharePoint®. The sophistication in the middle of the client engagement spectrum varies considerably from one law firm to another. Often, the experience is piecemeal, with different capabilities provided by multiple solutions. The client experience may be tech-savvy, but it's not necessarily unified.



Professional-grade experiences. This category takes digital engagement up to an even higher level. These interactions require professional-grade technology to deliver a consistent user experience. At the low end of this level, that experience may be as simple as a firm's consistent branding across multiple client-facing tools. More sophisticated firms choose to employ customized platforms or even completely bespoke solutions to create a fully customized digital experience.

That experience is a key consideration at this level. Many law firms naturally focus on the form of their client experience while losing sight of the function that it provides—how easily the client can understand, navigate, and put the firm's website and platforms to work. From a client experience perspective, digital interaction is about more than aesthetics. It requires platforms meet users' ease-of-use priorities in all online actions.



You could view seamless digital interconnection as a group of strategies that make your client feel welcome and valued.

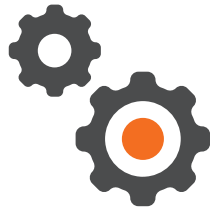
Consider the experience of ordering a product online. Not so long ago, you would mail or call in an order for an item of clothing or a gift box of edible delicacies, then wait the requisite seven to 10 business days for its arrival. That arrival would always be something of a surprise, which could be fun—or frustrating, if it came later than you’d hoped.

These days, we’ve become accustomed to tracking those shipments in real time or close to it. In a very real sense, we’re partners in the delivery experience. For many, that’s almost more fun than the package that one day suddenly appears on the front step. And from a purely practical perspective, knowing exactly when the package arrives can also help prevent it from being stolen.

This is the type of transparency and partnership more and more clients want. And a great many also need these capabilities. For instance, a client with global operations typically must access documents just about any time of day, and access them quickly and easily.

You could view seamless digital interconnection as a group of strategies that make your client feel welcome and valued. Once they’re comfortable, you can offer services and capabilities that deepen the relationship





And one powerful way you can add value through client engagement is by offering ways to help improve your clients' business operations—in particular, by helping make them more efficient.

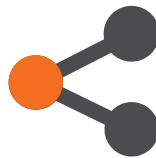
Client data and the client-centric firm

As your firm builds digital engagement with clients, it will accumulate a large quantity of client data within its IT system. These volumes are becoming tsunamis. These massive waves include “structured” data, such as client databases and billing information, as well as “unstructured” data generated by contracts and other shared documents, such as product information and market details.

To be sure, firms have long seen client data as a business asset they can use to refine various aspects of their business—marketing and billing, for instance. But from a client-centric perspective, client data can also become a means of improving engagement and adding value. Here are some strategies for accomplishing this, along with some considerations to keep in mind as you put them in place:



Dashboards are a particularly user-friendly way to bring together all the information a client needs involving a given matter. This information can include where each document is located (is it with the client or the lawyer?), how the matter is progressing in the process, and whether that process involves, say, litigation or a complex business transaction.



Secure file sharing. Clients should not only feel welcome, they should feel safe. That's why a firm's client engagement strategies must include rigorous cybersecurity protocols. Clients will want proof of how you're protecting the sensitive data they're sharing with you. You also may wish to obtain your client's informed consent to store and transmit sensitive information. Further, your security protocols should go beyond firewalls to include (for instance) programs that teach and remind lawyers and staff of basic security hygiene measures: not leaving laptops in cars or clicking on phishing links, for example.



On-demand client connection. Clients should be able to access information about a case or project whenever they have a question or concern. You don't need to be available by phone or email. A dashboard or portal can allow them to check in without requiring contact.



Data as a strategic asset. Take a deep dive into a client's history with your firm. What do the client's legal needs reveal? Might that information be valuable for your future planning, or the client's?

Well-managed data could help both you and your clients make more informed business decisions and thus operate more effectively. Imagine analyzing the data already passing through your firm in order to see patterns and gain insights into the ways clients use (or don't use) your services. Many forward-thinking firms already provide real-time metrics and reporting so that their clients clearly understand the value the firm is bringing to their business. Internally, you can use historical data on certain types of work to base your pricing, devising an agreement that's fair to your firm and clearly laid out for your client. Both sides will have a better idea of the true costs of a service.

Effective data management strategies like these point to the future of legal client service, particularly for larger firms whose market consists primarily of large clients. If yours is one such firm, this probably isn't breaking news. But if you view these issues through the lens of client engagement, you can address them in fresh ways that will allow you to build a deeper relationship with current clients and attract the business of new ones.

And one powerful way you can add value through client engagement is by offering ways to help improve your clients' business operations—in particular, by helping make them more efficient.



Look for ways to streamline your interactions with clients by reducing red tape and bureaucratic hoops.

Client engagement and true efficiency

What does client-centric efficiency look like? It's not solely about whether you and your team are getting work done quicker, with fewer write-offs and so on. Instead, consider what it means for your clients that you operate "lean." Are you a good steward of the money and time that they're spending on you? Are you willing to alter your firm's long-established processes in order to better serve them?

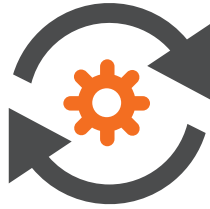
Efficient law firm operations that the client sees and benefits from go beyond an internally focused view of efficiency that emphasizes doing more in less time:

- Could a more rigorous intake process reduce repetitive conversations and get your firm delivering value sooner and use up less of the client's time?
- Could changes to your billing process result in a more consistent, predictable billing cycle? Could it reduce disputed charges or resolve them more quickly?
- What about your client-facing systems and processes? Are you delivering answers or replies faster through automation or more streamlined workflows? Are your status reports available on demand, reducing the number of meetings you and your client need to schedule?

Perhaps most important of all, it's crucial to make your firm truly easy to work with. Look for ways to streamline your interactions with clients by reducing red tape and bureaucratic hoops. You can look at it as friction reduction—delivering service and value as quickly and painlessly as possible. That is the essence of client-centric efficiency.

Another way to deliver value is by delivering more—specifically, more types of services.





Even if your firm (whatever its size) has all the right tools and processes in place, you also need to take a close look at how they work together.

A holistic approach to client engagement

A holistic engagement strategy means delivering expanded services to clients in addition to legal representation. These are typically advisory services that embrace other aspects of a client's business. Over the past decade, more and more larger firms have added advisory services in areas such as IT, finance, and crisis management. They have attained true partner relationships with their business clients as a result. They also are better positioned to compete with businesses that aren't law firms, per se—large accounting and business consulting firms, most notably—that are providing many kinds of legal services.

One law firm that's tailoring its service offerings for the changing marketplace is McCarthy Tétrault, a national Canadian firm with global offices and about 700 lawyers and 1,600 total employees. McCarthy has created what it calls MT>Divisions, which provides niche services to clients that typically have in-house legal departments seeking to shift some work to cost-effective outside firms. These services typically have a legal aspect—for instance, McCarthy's MT>Version division provides AI-driven legal translation services. Many of its practice groups and divisions offer services that shade into business advisory functions addressing clients' strategic issues. One example is McCarthy's Cyber/Data Group, which advises clients across industry sectors on data protection and cybersecurity, helping them unlock the value of the data they possess.

As for smaller firms, they have long played an advisory role to businesses they serve. These advisory services typically fall within the legal realm, such as contracts and acquisitions. Even so, small firms can also take advantage of digital platforms such as document sharing and communications apps in order to make the relationship more efficient. These kinds of capabilities can also help smaller firms attract new business clients, particularly those incorporating up-to-date technologies in their own operations.

Even if your firm (whatever its size) has all the right tools and processes in place, you also need to take a close look at how they work together. For large firms, this requires a broad and purposeful approach to client engagement: delivering consistent digital experiences, establishing partnerships with the client that comprise many different services, and minimizing any friction when a client interacts with your firm. This approach brings together the larger strategic moves that place the client at the centre of your focus, along with the smaller details that make clients sense that you are truly responding to their distinctive concerns and needs.

If you run a small law firm, extended services and digital complexity are usually less of an issue. That noted, you can still benefit from considering the ways you engage with current and potential clients through your digital presence. You may have a well-designed website and mature online presence, but true client engagement requires the kinds of digital access discussed previously in this paper. These strategies can assure potential clients you can handle their matters with the care, expertise, and attention to detail they need.



Law firms will always be asked to add more value for their clients. That is especially true when the relationship is meant to extend beyond one or more transactions and become or remain an ongoing partnership.

Your future belongs to your clients

Regardless of your firm's size, there are numerous opportunities to add value to your client relationships. But in order to capitalize on these opportunities, you will need to reevaluate some of your ingrained practices and processes. The standard operating procedures you've developed may work seamlessly for you, but they may be less useful to your clients.

Client engagement, then, should include talking with your clients and listening closely to what they tell you. By getting to understand their business and its operations more deeply, you can deliver the services they really need, and do so efficiently. Regular "listening sessions" can also help you become aware when their needs change. The goal is to achieve a level of intimacy and partnership with your client, even when the predominant mode of engagement is digital.

Client engagement challenges are never 100% "solved" once and for all. Technologies, expectations, and standards change. New technology enables new capabilities (and new challenges), and trends in customer experience from outside the legal industry influence clients' expectations.

But amid all that change, one thing will remain constant: Law firms will always be asked to add more value for their clients. That is especially true when the relationship is meant to extend beyond one or more transactions and become or remain an ongoing partnership. By putting the client at the centre of your practice, you can develop ways to add that value—both to the client and to your firm.