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Designing a Client Experience That Actually Differentiates Your Firm

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The Truth About 'Client-Focused' Firms

Law firms say it universally in website copy, pitch decks, and other marketing and business development communications: We are client-focused, we put our clients first, our clients are our partners. But saying it and delivering it are two entirely different things.

The gap between the two shows up in daily client experiences. Bills arrive based on codes that obscure what was done and by whom. The senior partner who led the pitch hands the matter to an associate without any introduction, explanation or communication whatsoever. Attorneys provide status updates when they have a filing to report rather than when the client needs to know where things stand. A client who calls with a question reaches voicemail and waits for a return call. The relationship technically exists, but no one at the firm owns it beyond the lead attorney. When that attorney is unavailable or departs, the client has no institutional anchor.

What Clients Expect and What Firms Can Deliver

The client experience issue influences recommendations from one general counsel to another. BTI Consulting's 2025 research puts a number on the reality of this: Only 25.6% of clients would recommend their primary law firm to a peer, down from 79.1% in 2020.

What do clients expect, and what can firms deliver to get these numbers back on track? You can best design your clients' experience by improving key service approaches:

- Move from single attorney relationships to multiple attorney partnerships.
- Demonstrate the priority you place on your clients by communicating proactively and responding timely.

Courtesy photos

Dave Poston, left, and Beth Huffman, right, of Poston Communications.

- Address financials and billing topics early and openly.
- Let clients know that you care about their professional and personal needs

Over-Reliance on a Single Partner Relationship

Firms that build client relationships around a single attorney create a potential point of failure. Beyond common sense that a complex client relationship would be stronger simply by developing multiple supporting relationships, research from Heidi Gardner, Ph.D. and Distinguished Fellow at Harvard Law School's Center on the Legal Profession, confirms that clients served by multiple practices within a firm are far more likely to stay with that firm for the long term, including when the primary relationship partner departs.

Responsiveness and Communication

No matter how many attorneys collaborate with them, clients arrive in a legal relationship with expectations that law firms consistently underdeliver on.

Responsiveness tops that list, and predictable communication outweighs speed. Clients value knowing a call will be returned within a set time period above an immediate response. A brief acknowledgment while the attorney gathers information is worth more than silence. Closely tied to responsiveness are overall communication practices. Case Status found that only 28% of clients describe their law firms as proactive in communication. Clients expect updates on their schedules, yet law firms continue to fall short simply by asking for preferences.

Billing Transparency

Clients understand that legal work carries real cost. What they want is clarity about what they are paying for before the invoice arrives and billing transparency when it does. Clio's 2024 legal trends report found that lack of clarification around cost at intake and delayed billing drive experience problems, regardless of work quality. Both gaps can lead to bill questions or late payments. Clients who receive routine budget updates and invoices written in plain terms pay faster and are more inclined to expand the relationship. Discovering a client's billing preferences at matter opening and coordinating with finance is a simple step that consistently improves satisfaction.

Expressing Care for a Client's Needs

Understanding a client's issues and empathizing with their needs goes further than legal analysis alone. Attorneys who ask whether a matter is bet-the-company, whether it is keeping the client awake at night or whether it could cost the client a key position build a fuller picture of what is at stake. Clients who feel their service provider understands their situation beyond its legal dimensions are more likely to remain loyal and refer others to the firm.

A client wants to feel a firm's enthusiasm and concern. Lack of attention to detail, such as filing errors and missed deadlines, communicates inattention that clients read as indifference. The Case Status research found that nearly 80% of law firm clients feel uncared for; specifically, they reported that their legal team did not actively check in or request feedback. Only 40% of clients described their firm as «caring,» compared to 72% of attorneys who used that word to describe their own firm, revealing a stark disconnect between how firms perceive their own client care and how clients actually experience it.

Embedding Client Focus in Firm Culture

Some firms have published their client service commitments on their websites, making those promises visible and accountable to the clients they serve. Jones Day's Values page frames client service as "a singular tradition" built on four explicit pillars: deep engagement with and understanding of each client, seamless cross-practice collaboration where all clients belong to the firm rather than to an individual attorney, access to the full range of the firm's talent across every jurisdiction and practice area, and shared professional values that give the firm's lawyers the credibility to represent clients effectively when positions are unpopular or contested.

McCarter & English publishes a dedicated client service values page with 10 named commitments, among them understanding clients' businesses in full strategic context, acting as a single firm instead of a collection of individual practices, delivering value through efficiency and explicitly communicating a willingness to help.

Baker & Hostetler names five institutional commitments on its client service commitments page: highest-quality service, effective matter management, invested partnerships, an innovative approach to legal services and value add. The language is specific and accountable. As part of that first pledge, Baker & Hostetler promises proactive communication and timely response "in the manner you prefer." Under the partnership pledge, it commits to understanding clients' businesses deeply enough to anticipate legal needs as an extension of their operations. The firm frames these not as aspirational goals but as obligations "ingrained in the culture and fabric of Baker & Hostetler, at every level, encompassing every client service touchpoint."

"Responsive, timely, high-value client service has been an articulated core value of our firm since its founding over 100 years ago. As a result, we are a client-centric law firm. That requires an unwavering commitment to our clients that guides every interaction, matter, relationship and touchpoint. Our clients deserve white-glove, red-carpet service, and we work every day to deliver that experience. We strive to be true partners, serving as an extension of our clients' teams so that we can deeply understand their business, culture and goals; anticipate their needs; communicate proactively; and offer practical, tailored and innovative solutions that help them achieve success.

And, importantly, we celebrate their success," said Paul Schmidt, chairman at Baker & Hostetler.

These public declarations serve a specific purpose: They are institutional promises made publicly to every prospective client, current client and lateral candidate considering the firm. Publishing them raises the standard of accountability in a way that an internal program, however well designed, does not.

Doing It Right the First Time, Every Time

Consistent legal work results from oversight and discipline applied across every matter a firm handles. Yet in many firms, client experience is left to individual discretion with no shared standard for how a call gets returned or a status update gets delivered. As a result, each attorney and practice group handles communication and client intake differently. This inconsistency is the primary threat to a firm-level client experience strategy.

High-performing firms apply the same operational rigor to client experience that they bring to legal quality: documented protocols and defined accountability reviewed at a regular cadence. Standardized practice is a starting point. Adapting those standards to specific client needs is what separates adequate from excellent.

Tracking Client Relationship Management

Beyond public commitments, a small but growing number of firms are treating client relationship management as a professional discipline rather than an attorney's obligation. Ropes & Gray has built a dedicated key accounts program staffed by client development specialists who work exclusively on the firm's most important client relationships, supporting client teams with retention strategies, share-of-wallet growth and proactive satisfaction monitoring. These professionals sit within a structured hierarchy that includes a director of client development and client development managers, creating an institutional layer of client accountability that operates independently of any single partner relationship.

Firms like Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison; Benesch and Baker McKenzie have taken this a step further, investing in dedicated business professionals whose explicit mandate is client experience: anticipating needs and resolving friction before it surfaces as dissatisfaction. While titles vary across firms, these individuals hold portfolios of the firm's highest-value relationships and maintain regular, organized contact with those clients, ensuring that satisfaction is monitored, issues are addressed and the relationship stays strong regardless of which attorney is in the room.

At Benesch, this commitment takes shape through Benesch Edge, a program dedicated entirely to client experience and built on four guiding commitments: elevate partnerships, earn trust, every day, exceed expectations. Central to this approach is a structured client feedback program, an essential component of any client experience evaluation, because without a formal mechanism for gathering and acting on client input, firms are left guessing at satisfaction rather than measuring it.

"The most important part of a client feedback program is not the survey itself; it is what happens next," said Jeanne Hammerstrom, chief marketing officer at Benesch. "Clients are generous with their time when they believe their input will lead to action. That means routing feedback quickly, involving the right people, tracking follow-up and making sure the client understands that their perspective changed something. It goes without saying, preparation before any discussion seeking feedback is also key, always have prediscussion meetings with the relationship attorney and team. That way you're less surprised with any positive or negative feedback. However, don't go into the discussion believing you already know their experience and expectations."

The Client Experience Differentiation Payoff

Firms that have made client experience a formal function are building a measurable competitive advantage. Declining referral rates, clients considering next steps when a senior partner departs, and in-house buyers dissatisfied with the value they've received define the current market. Firms willing to address all three will define client experience in practice and prove it.

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