



## How to Maximize the Quality (Not Quantity) of Client Communications

Conventional wisdom holds that the more communications that flow between a lawyer and her client, the better. And for the most part, that wisdom is sound. The more clients communicate about the facts behind a given deal or a piece of litigation, for instance, the more informed their lawyers' strategies will be. Even outside of active engagements, communications between lawyer and client are generally beneficial to both. Lawyers, for their part, can learn a lot about their clients' operations in a recreational setting—on the golf course, at a ball game, etc.—and sometimes that leads to more business.

But let's not fool ourselves. When it comes to lawyer-client communications, there can, in fact, be too much of a good thing. Some dealings between the parties—say, haggling over a rate discount—don't always enhance the relationship. In fact, when discussions over money or other subjects get tense, they can cast a dark shadow over all other communications.

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These may seem like obvious insights, but lawyers often do not consider them in their business development efforts. Many of those efforts focus on spurring conversations between lawyers and existing or would-be clients. Networking, developing a social media presence, pursuing speaking engagements—these activities can nurture positive and productive communications. Lawyers and firms are right to put their energy into them. But in addition to promoting good communications, they can also help themselves out by eliminating the bad.

Here are two concrete steps firms can take to minimize communications with the potential to sour client relationships.

## ESTABLISH CLIENT PORTALS

If your firm has many clients, or a large volume of ongoing matters (active litigation files, say), offering a client portal is a good idea. In fact, it's a good idea for any firm. Client portals are secure online forums in which lawyers and individual clients can share information. For instance, a law firm that defends a retailer against personal injury claims could place all its filings, organized by cases, onto a client portal. The client is able to access those documents at all times, without having to make a request to the law firm.

The communications portals render unnecessary, then, are the kind of requests for documents and information that drain time from attorneys (and frustrate clients if they have to wait), without adding to the relationship. Far better to create a virtual file cabinet on a portal. The qualities firms should look for in these platforms include security as well as the ability to share documents, messages and bills (more on that below). Some portals will also allow you to assign tasks to clients (review a document by a certain date, for instance), and keep a joint calendar.



While they are becoming more common, portals are not yet ubiquitous, and they give the law firms that use them an air of sophistication. To make the most of the branding impact of a client portal, firms can search out portal providers that allow firms to customize their URLs.

## IMPROVE BILLING PRACTICES

You may be surprised to see the subject of billing come up in an article about client communications. And, well, that's the point: bills are a significant touchpoint between lawyers and clients, but we think of them as utilitarian documents rather than acts of communication. Bills give rise to plenty of tension between lawyers and clients, not to mention angry phone calls and feelings of frustration. Some of that may be inevitable, but firms can adopt several practices that can minimize uncomfortable back and forth about bills.

- **Get an accounts payable email address:** Bills should go to the main client contact, of course, but they should also go to the person who actually cuts the check. There are multiple benefits to this, including the fact that if the client is late in paying its bill, the lawyer does not have to go directly to their closest contact. They can instead make an initial inquiry with the accounts payable contact.
- **Identify time written off:** Bills are a chance for a law firm to highlight all the value it has delivered to its client. But what about the work the firm isn't even charging them for? It should appear prominently on the bill, with a clear indication that the client got the time and effort for free. The client can't appreciate it if they don't see it. When they do, it will make them feel better about the time they are paying for.
- **Write descriptive time entries:** In their time entries, lawyers should make an effort to communicate the value their time delivered to the client. The client who sees a \$1,500 charge for "reviewed depositions" is going to feel one way

about their bill; the client who sees the same charge for “reviewed record to formulate class certification argument” is going to feel another.

- **No block billing:** Relatedly, no client wants to see one 25-hour charge for a summary judgment motion. They will be far more understanding, and thankful, if they see the time broken out into individual tasks described clearly.

Client portals and billing may seem like impersonal communications—and they are. When executed well, however, they minimize communications that create headaches and allow lawyers and their clients to focus on those that grow their relationships.

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