



All for **ONE** AND **FOR ALL**

Relationship Essentials for Legal Administrators and Vendors Servicing the Legal Profession

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Having been on all sides of the vendor relationship — working for law firms, for vendors and for consultants to law firms and corporate law departments — we have seen the evolution of law-related organizations as businesses and observed a wide range of relationships between vendors and the organizations they work with.

From our perspective, vendors and administrators can learn a lot from each other and from the recent evolution of law firms.

Attorneys in law firms have come to see themselves as (1) professionals and (2) service providers. They have long prided themselves on their professionalism. It has, however, taken awhile for some law firms to recognize their role as service providers. But they have come to embrace this role, in which they work to understand and cater to the needs of their clients.

Legal administrators play a similar role, with one distinction: They are professionals whose “clients” are the attorneys and staff of their organizations.

Vendors would do well to follow the example of the lawyers and administrators they work with. They need to see themselves as professionals in whatever they do, and act accordingly, in order to engender the respect of the lawyers and administrators they are serving.

Equally important, whether selling a product or a service, vendors should regard themselves as service providers to the law firms. Accordingly, they

should work to understand — and cater to — clients’ needs.

And, as lawyers and administrators have come to understand, there is no contradiction in being both a professional and a service provider.

Lawyers and administrators pride themselves on the quality of their work and their dedication to client service, and they have a right to expect a similar approach from those who support their practice.

For many vendors and administrators this will require a new way of thinking. And, for both the vendors and the

administrators, it will necessitate developing a new and more multidimensional way of regarding — and working with — one another.

Both parties need to realize that the relationship is not just about sales, marketing and pricing. It is, instead, about understanding the law firm’s needs, offering solutions and recognizing what each particular client values most in its vendors, be it product variety, competitive prices, responsive service or something else.

As is true of the ties between lawyers and their clients, the ties between vendors and their clients have become a relationship business. It is not about selling. Rather, it is about the vendor building a relationship with its clients. Vendors become trusted advisers who bring continuing value to the relationship.

Just as most law firms have had to focus on particular areas of expertise, administrators and vendors recognize

that the vendors must concentrate their expertise on a narrower range of products or services, and aim to be the best at providing those products or services.

The fact is that vendors are providers with knowledge and expertise that law firms want and need. If vendors recognize that, and act that way in dealing with the law firms, they open up the possibility of becoming trusted and valued providers.

For the vendor to become a valued service provider to law firms, both administrators and vendors should consider these suggestions:

- **It is all part of a chain.** Lawyers serve their clients. Administrators serve their lawyers. Vendors serve the administrators. Everyone shares the same purpose — to give service and deliver a quality product (however that product is defined). It is just the recipient of that service and product who changes.
- **View the relationship in the long term.** Start with a dialogue, in which vendors do most of the listening. Vendors should ask the right questions, and listen to what administrators say they want and need. If vendors truly understand their clients, they can determine how they can help address those needs and solve the problems. If vendors are seen as listeners and problem solvers, they can develop a long-term relationship. Vendors should not become frustrated if law firms are not buying their products after one or two meetings. Building lasting relationships takes time.
- **Administrators want their vendors to act like professionals.** They need to dress professionally, not sloppily; be courteous; and write and speak well.
- **Age before beauty.** It is obviously important for vendors to understand their products and services, yet it is just as vital that they recognize what

value they can bring to the legal organization. They need to be well grounded as professionals if they are to earn the confidence of the administrators.

- **Vendors need to know their wares.** If they hope to have credibility, they need to know their product or service backward and forward. And,



more important than understanding its features is understanding its value.

- **Who is on the vendor's team makes all the difference.** A service provider's staff members need not have worked with the vendor for a long time, but they do need to act like they plan to work for the client for a long time to come. Vendors should show their clients that they have a real team, not a bunch of solo practitioners.
- **Vendors need to see themselves as consultants.** It is vital to know the market, including the practice areas, culture and management styles of the firms the vendors are working with (or want to work with). Solutions can be tailored to fit the needs of each client. Clients should never get the impression their vendors are taking a standard product off the shelf or offering cookie-cutter solutions.
- **It's not always about the sale.** Vendors need to commit themselves to developing relationships, without having to make a sale every single

time. The legal community may require (and appreciate) advice and discussion at a given point, rather than making a purchase. This will help the relationship and the vendor's reputation in the long run. On the flip side, from the law firm's perspective it is not always about saving the last dollar. Frequently, you really do get what you pay for.

Sometimes, a non-commodity service will cost more. The firm is investing in service and the relationship; it needs to be willing to pay for it.

- **Marketing materials are a resource, not just a sales tool.** Vendors need to use the materials to provide useful information and educate clients. With the right materials, they can demonstrate their industry awareness and sensitivity while providing useful information.
- **It is about trust and loyalty.** Vendors should show their clients that they are worthy of their trust. They must be honest, even if by doing so they lose a sale. The legal profession is, in many ways, a tight network, and a vendor's reputation can quickly be damaged when law firms become aware that that vendor has broken promises to other firms. Vendors need to earn a firm's trust and keep earning it with every contact with the client. Similarly, law firms need to realize that trust is a two-way street. Administrators have to be willing to take vendors into their confidence, so that together they can arrive at the best solutions.
- **You scratch my back.** Law firms and vendors should become part of each other's support network and each other's referral network.
- **Make the client look good.** If vendors make their clients look good, those clients are likely to reciprocate and return the favor tenfold.
- **Understand the power of an unhappy client.** Vendors would do

well to remember that, while happy clients tend to tell one or two people how happy they are, unhappy clients tell far more.

- **A strong relationship between a law firm and a vendor is one in which both sides can keep learning from one another.** The law firm needs to educate its vendor-partners about what the firm needs to succeed; vendors need to respond by demonstrating how they can help chart a path to that success.
- **Don't play the blame game.** Vendors should take responsibility when something goes wrong — and do everything possible to take corrective action. Likewise, law firms should not jump to conclusions too quickly by blaming their vendors. Remember, in the right relationship, you make a team to find solutions.
- **It's a marathon, not a sprint.** Vendors need to show their clients

that they are always there for them. In turn, administrators need to reward those enduring relationships.

Both parties must avoid telling the other what they think they want to hear. Vendors and firms need to focus instead on overcoming the barriers that hinder open and honest communication. Administrators are important in the process. They set the parameters about what they want from their vendors; the vendors, in turn, need to be honest about what they can do for the administrators. From there, they can build a mutually rewarding and lasting professional relationship.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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