



The Art of Managing Clients – Even the Difficult Ones

Law school taught you to analyze cases, draft briefs, and think like a lawyer, but it probably didn't prepare you for the moment when a client calls you at 9 PM demanding to know why their case isn't resolved yet, or when someone insists their parking ticket case deserves the same attention as a Supreme Court appeal. Welcome to client management – the skill that separates successful attorneys from those who burn out wondering why they ever left academia.

Here's what your professors didn't tell you: being a great lawyer isn't just about knowing the law. It's about managing relationships with people who are often stressed, confused, and dealing with some of the worst moments of their lives. Your ability to navigate these relationships will determine not just your success, but your sanity.

Understanding the Client Mindset

Before you can manage clients effectively, you need to understand what they're going through. For most people, hiring a lawyer represents a crisis or major life event. They're dealing with divorce, criminal charges, business disputes, or other situations that feel overwhelming and scary. Even sophisticated business clients dealing with routine transactions often feel anxious about legal complexities they don't fully understand.

This emotional context explains a lot of "difficult" client behavior. When someone calls you five times in one day asking for updates, they're not necessarily being unreasonable – they're scared and seeking reassurance. When a client questions every bill or challenges your strategy, they might be feeling powerless and trying to regain some control over their situation. Recognizing this emotional backdrop doesn't mean accepting inappropriate behavior, but it helps you respond with empathy rather than defensiveness. The client who seems demanding might actually be desperate for information and reassurance that their case is being handled properly.

Setting Expectations Early and Often

The foundation of good client management is setting clear expectations from the very beginning. This starts with your initial consultation and continues throughout the representation. Many client problems stem from misunderstandings about what you'll do, how long it will take, and what outcomes are realistic.



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Be specific about your role and limitations. Explain that you can't control court schedules, opposing parties, or regulatory timelines. Help clients understand that legal processes often move slowly and involve periods of waiting that don't reflect lack of progress. If you typically return calls within 24 hours, tell them that upfront rather than letting them wonder why you haven't called back in two hours.

Discuss money early and honestly. Explain your billing practices, provide cost estimates when possible, and address payment expectations clearly. Most clients appreciate transparency about fees, and clear financial boundaries prevent many conflicts down the road.

Set communication boundaries that work for both of you. Some clients need frequent updates to feel comfortable, while others prefer minimal contact unless something significant happens. Find out what your client prefers and establish realistic parameters you can maintain consistently.



The Power of Proactive Communication

Most client management problems stem from poor communication, and the solution is usually more communication, not less. Clients become difficult when they feel ignored, uninformed, or uncertain about what's happening with their case. Develop systems for regular client updates, even when there's no news to report. A brief email explaining that you're waiting for a response from opposing counsel or that a hearing has been scheduled prevents clients from wondering whether you've forgotten about them. "No news" updates might seem unnecessary, but they demonstrate that you're actively working on their matter.

Return calls and emails promptly, even if you don't have complete answers yet. A quick response acknowledging their message and explaining when you'll have more information shows respect for their concerns and prevents anxiety from building.

Use language your clients can understand. Legal jargon might make you sound smart, but it makes clients feel excluded and confused. Explain legal concepts in plain English, and check whether they understand what you've told them. Remember that people retain very little information when they're stressed, so important points often need repeating.

Dealing with Common Difficult Situations

Every attorney encounters certain types of challenging client behavior. Learning to handle these situations professionally protects both your sanity and your client relationships.

The micromanager wants to control every detail of their case and questions your every decision. With these clients, involve them in strategy discussions when appropriate, explain your reasoning clearly, and document your recommendations. Sometimes they just need to feel heard and included in the process.





The emergency client treats every development as a crisis requiring immediate attention. Help them distinguish between true emergencies and routine developments. Establish protocols for genuine emergencies while educating them about normal legal timelines and processes.

The bargain hunter constantly questions your fees and compares your rates to other attorneys. Address fee concerns directly and explain the value you provide. If they're genuinely unable to afford your services, help them find appropriate alternatives rather than letting resentment build.

The emotional client may cry, yell, or share excessive personal details during every conversation. Show empathy while maintaining professional boundaries. Acknowledge their emotions while redirecting focus to legal issues you can actually help with.

Building Long-Term Relationships

Good client management isn't just about handling problems – it's about building relationships that benefit both you and your clients over time. Satisfied clients become referral sources, repeat customers, and advocates for your practice. Remember personal details about your clients and their situations. Following up on non-legal matters they've mentioned shows that you see them as people, not just cases. A brief note asking how their daughter's wedding went or whether their business expansion succeeded demonstrates genuine care.

Celebrate successes with your clients and acknowledge their role in positive outcomes. Most clients have never worked with lawyers before and don't understand that their cooperation and patience contributed to successful results. Stay in touch appropriately after cases end. Holiday cards, updates about legal developments that might affect them, or congratulations on business achievements help maintain relationships that often lead to future work or referrals.

Managing Your Own Emotional Response

Client management is emotionally demanding work, and managing your own reactions is crucial for long-term success. Some clients will frustrate, anger, or drain you, and learning to handle these feelings professionally is essential.

Develop strategies for staying calm during difficult conversations. Take breaks when needed, practice active listening, and remember that client emotions usually aren't personal attacks on you. Having colleagues you can vent to (while respecting confidentiality rules) helps process frustrating interactions.

Set boundaries that protect your personal time and mental health. You don't need to be available 24/7 for non-emergency matters, and clients generally respect reasonable limits when they're clearly communicated.





Remember that you can't solve all your clients' problems or make all their stress disappear. Focus on the legal issues you can address competently while maintaining empathy for the broader challenges they're facing.

The Professional Rewards

Managing clients well, including difficult ones, becomes one of the most rewarding aspects of legal practice. When you help someone navigate a challenging situation successfully, the gratitude and relief they express makes the stress worthwhile.

Good client management skills also make you a more valuable attorney. Partners notice associates who handle client relationships smoothly, and clients recommend lawyers who made them feel supported and informed throughout difficult processes.

Most importantly, strong client management skills make practicing law more enjoyable. When you can turn potentially difficult situations into positive relationships, work becomes less stressful and more personally satisfying. The art of client management takes time to develop, but it's one of the most important skills you'll acquire as a practicing attorney. Your legal knowledge gets clients in the door, but your ability to manage relationships keeps them there and brings others through referrals.

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