

Are You Client-Focused?

by Sara Holtz, ClientFocus

In my experience as a client, if you ask a lawyer “How are you doing?”, you often get the response “I am crazy busy” or “I’m swamped.”

Yet, when you think about it, is that *really* the message you want to send to a client or a potential client? After all, if you had an important legal problem (which is when a person calls a lawyer who charges as much as you do!), would you want to hire someone who may not have time to give the matter her undivided attention?

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And yet, when I point out this contradiction to my own clients, they often say, “Well, I don’t want them to think I’m not busy!”

Let’s take a closer look at that response. Why do you believe it’s important that your clients think you are very busy? Do you assume they think you’re not busy? Would they interpret your not being “crazy busy” as evidence that you are not a good lawyer?

My guess is that most of your potential clients don’t give much thought to how busy you are (other than wishing you’d respond to their phone calls more quickly!) and that most judge your legal skills on a more rational basis than your busyness.

As I pondered the question of why lawyers seem so wedded to proclaiming their busyness, I realized the obvious answer. Within your firm, it is important to convey that you are very busy. “Being busy” is shorthand for saying that clients and the other lawyers in your firm have confidence in your abilities, that you are pulling your own weight, that you are on track to make your numbers this year, that you are contributing to the firm’s bottom line.

However, a response that works well *within* your firm may not produce a desired result *outside* the firm. Think of what a better response “I’m working on some really interesting projects right now” would be from a client’s perspective rather than saying “I’m on overwhelm.”

What serves a purpose when speaking with your partners may backfire when talking to a potential client. And while this example may seem like a small point, it’s really not.

Law firms can be insular places. A client who was newly appointed to a leadership role in his firm once confided in me that he was surprised at how much of the management committee discussions focused on internal issues – which practice groups were doing well, how a lateral hire might improve the firm’s profitability, how a rate increase would affect the bottom line, and so on. He was surprised that more time was not devoted to external issues such as their clients’ satisfaction with the range of services offered, staffing configurations that would best meet clients’ needs, and the challenges their clients might face in the next three years and how they could help them address those problems.

In both the minor issue of how someone chooses to respond to the question “How are you doing?” and the major issue of what topics a management committee chooses to focus on, what is missing? Seeing the world through the *clients’* eyes. Said another way, what’s missing is “client focus.”

In your everyday interactions with clients and potential clients, try to shift *your* focus from your viewpoint – and the world you live in – to the *clients’* perspective and the world they inhabit. I suspect you’ll find that by being more client-focused, your business development efforts will be much more effective.



About Sara Holtz

ClientFocus Founder and CEO Sara Holtz is the author of **Bringin’ in the Rain: A Woman Lawyer’s Guide to Business Development**. Sara helps successful women lawyers become rainmakers. Since 1995, she has worked with hundreds of partners from the nation’s leading law firms to help them grow their business.

She created the Women Rainmakers Roundtable, which has helped more than 450 women partners develop substantial books of business. Sara’s articles have appeared in **The American Lawyer**, **ABA Journal**, **Law Practice**, **Litigation** and other publications.

Before founding ClientFocus, Sara was General Counsel of Nestle Beverage Company, and was the first woman chairman of the Association of Corporate Counsel. She graduated from Yale College and Harvard Law School.

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