

ART OF MAINTAINING CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS DURING CRISIS

PATRONISE THOSE WHO'VE PATRONISED YOU



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“The silver lining to the troubled times is the opportunity to grow relationships and stand for your clients.”

As we see a deluge of emails and ‘subtle’ marketing messages being exchanged, we wonder whether ‘being commercial’ is the new definition of ‘being professional’. We understand that many of us are facing a sudden slack in work owing to the difficult times, but isn’t this also a time when all of us need to not only be driven by commercial pursuits, but genuinely connect with our clients and colleagues? As firm believers in nurturing relationships, **Bithika Anand** and **Nipun Bhatia** write this piece to share their views on connecting with people on more empathetic grounds amidst these testing times. If you’re wondering how some lawyers are still able to get fresh mandates amidst standstill of economic activity, read on.

Unprecedented Times

A lot has changed globally over the past few weeks. We are witnessing unprecedented times and none of us was prepared to fight the global outbreak of this pandemic that has left several nations across the globe amidst a lock-down. Most of us are under a house-arrest and catering to work from home. Thanks to technology, we have been connected like never before and a lot of organisations, as well as individuals, have explored a totally new way of working, i.e., ‘work from home’. But things are not the same for everyone. A lot of our friends from the legal fraternity have witnessed a sharp decline in their work. First, because the courts have either suspended their working or are functioning to cater to only urgent matters. Second, the economic activity is at an all-time low.

Sudden Availability of 'Free Time'

A lot of us, who always wished to get some free time to explore our hobbies, to have a break from our otherwise hectic schedules and to just have some time by ourselves doing 'nothing', are now finding it difficult to pass time. The legal services providers, especially, are finding it difficult to cope up with this sudden 'free time' that has been bestowed upon them. So, most of them are either finishing up their pending drafting work, or are catching up on reading about evolving laws and upcoming industry sectors, and several others are finally interacting online with members, peers and fellow members from the legal fraternity.

Connecting With Your Clients

Despite spending their time in so many different activities, we have frequently been asked by colleagues from the legal field as to what they should be doing during this time to ensure that they make not only a productive use of this period but also reach out to the fraternity on a larger level. As firm believers in nurturing relationships, we give only one piece of advice to our lawyer friends – this is the time to empathise with your clients, engage with them, and extend a helping hand. This is your time to go an extra mile for your clients and connect with them not only on commercial pursuits but also at a level where they look up to you with trust, confidence and someone who can resolve their issues. If you need to invoke your clients' trust and build long-lasting relationships, you need to reach out to your clients in a selfless and serving manner. Have you picked up the phone and spoken to your clients with respect to understanding how the outbreak of this pandemic has hit them commercially? Have you asked them how they plan to cope up with a sudden lockdown of economic activity? Have you asked them how you can help them build a contingency plan? If the answer to one or more of the questions is yes, you know the difference between 'practicing law' and 'business of practicing law'.

Time To Give Back To Relations Built Over Years

Now, we do understand that you may feel your clients are not in a position to afford the fee of a lawyer at this instance, when cost-cutting is the norm and every penny saved makes a difference. But we do have another question. If you do not reach out to them now, when they perhaps need you the most, how do you expect them to reach out to you when everything becomes normal? Many of us are making a big mistake by not extending a helping hand to those who've patronised us for years altogether. If you've billed your clients in the past and have had good professional ties with them (that have lasted for years in some cases!), then this is your time to pay back to those relations. Reach out to your clients and ask them what kind of help you can offer them. Just like you, they may also be struggling with their contracts and agreements. Offer them if you could review the contracts and agreements and help them with interpretation of certain clauses that may be availed to their benefit today.

Help Your Clients In Business Decisions

This is your time to offer reviewing their business plans and explaining to them the legal aspects they need to bear in mind, keeping in mind the sensitive business environment. This is also an apt time to help them and their team members with online workshops and sessions on technical skill-development and legal knowledge enhancement.

Difference Between Service Provider & Trusted Advisor

Endeavour to maintain a constant connection with them and keep checking on several developments as each day unfolds. As a service provider, one of your primary duties is to keep them informed of the steps taken by legislature and judiciary, especially pertaining to areas of practice that may concern them. This is also your chance to delve deeper, study the upcoming laws that may affect your clients businesses in the times to come and get yourself abreast with the latest legal developments. As business and law cannot be practised in isolation, utilise this free time in enhancing your commercial acumen, especially related to the industry sectors your clients belong to. At this time, when most businesses are contemplating a cost reduction to remain sustainable, legal fees should be the last thing that you should be discussing with the clients. Of course, we do understand that at the end of the day we are all running a commercial venture and sustainability is as much an issue for you as it is for them. But that's what differentiates a service provider from a trusted advisor. If you can help them sail through these challenging times, you can earn their trust, and most importantly build a relationship that will last for a lifetime.

Strategic Communication

Engaging with clients with a view to sort out their issues and digging deeper to understand the practical challenges they may be facing is way higher and more impactful than sending them mere cut-copy-paste messages and business promotion emails. Your communication at this point in time has to be strategic, well thought of and definitely not something that appears to be driven by commercial intent. If you need to go out of the way to make your clients feel welcome at this point in time, please do so.

Never Take Attorney-Client Relationship For Granted

Wondering how some lawyers are still able to get new mandates and fresh instructions from their clients, even amidst a lockdown or a general slack in the economic activity? It is because these lawyers, in order to build a successful practice, also worked hard in building an ongoing relationship with each client. Such relationships survive long after the first agreement or mandate signed with a client. In these challenging times, and otherwise, never take your attorney-client relationship for granted. Even if you call your clients or engage with them just to say 'hello' and have a brief conversation with them, trust me you'll make them feel like you value them.

Clients Subconsciously Form An Opinion

Small gestures like this will go a long way in building a perception of a dependable protector in the minds of your client. Contrary to this, even a short message sent with commercial intent, no matter how much you would try to camouflage it, will leave an impression in the mind of the client. Such a client may not outwardly react to a sales or pitch message, but they may subconsciously be formulating an opinion of you. If you specialise in a particular practice area, try and explore participating in online/virtual events being held by such organisations and forums. This will credibility and build subtle, yet positive perception to your clients. Sharing passion for the work that you do and your commitment to bring progressive changes to the field further strengthens clients' perception about how you care about the fraternity as a whole; and not just your individual legal practice.

Invest Time In Building Bonds

We would conclude this article by emphasising upon the value of building relationships. Lawyers and law firms give a lot of thrust to business development. But the relevance and importance of client retention gets somewhat diluted. It is also equally important, especially during the tough times all of us are witnessing today, that the existing clients are valued and taken care of. What may today just be a consultation on simpler and day today issues, may over a period of time evolve into open communications, matter updates, advise on business decisions and joint-engagement in community-level activities with your clients. Invest this time in building a bond with your clients, more so when the times are tough. The silver lining to the troubled times is the opportunity to grow relationships and stand for your clients. Relationships and bonds built during the adverse times are robust and usually survive a lifetime.



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