

## Practice Tips...

## What Do Clients Want?

It looks like marketing will be the lawyer's catchword for the 90's. Everywhere you look there are articles on how to market your practice, advertising, yellow pages, television, radio, direct mail, strategic planning, personnel management, and computers. Law is big business.

What seems to receive less emphasis is that the best way to build a law practice is to do superior work for your existing clients. Treat your clients well, get good results, and your former clients will be the best marketing program you can get.

What do clients want? Clients want fast action.

As soon as you have been retained, do something. You can always do something on a case the first day you are retained. Send a letter of representation to the opposing adjuster or your client's insurer. You can also send a letter to the client welcoming him or her and explaining some of the things you will do on the case.

Another thing you can do promptly is settle the property damage claim. To the attorney, the property damage is the smallest part of the case but to the client it may be the most important thing at that mo-

ment. At that first meeting you can obtain most of the information necessary to value the property damage loss. If the client has realistic expectations about the value of his or her automobile then you should be able to settle that claim promptly. Show the client that you are an attorney who will take action and get results.

Something else you can do immediately is submit the client's medical bills to the proper insurance carrier. Clients have often had medical bills rejected and are concerned about their credit rating. Take care of it.

## STOP THE WORRYING

Personal injury clients worry about their injury, their income, medical bills, and the legal process. They worry about being taken advantage of, about dealing with the insurance adjuster and about handling the insurance paperwork.

It is important to reassure clients that you have handled similar cases, that these legal matters need to be taken care of properly and you will help them do that. Reassuring the client does not mean telling them that everything is okay if in fact the case is weak. You reassure the client by indicating that you will explore the matter carefully and give the client a choice of options to choose from. It reassures clients and lets them know they will no longer have to deal with the insurance adjuster or fill out the insurance paperwork.



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## SHOW EFFORT

You show clients effort by sending them copies of the paperwork received and prepared. We send copies of nearly every piece of paper that comes into or goes out of our office. I recently started sending clients copies of legal research memos and the memo we dictate setting forth our discovery plan for the case. Most clients are delighted to see the information and recognize the work that goes into it.

When you talk to the client don't be modest. Let him or her know the effort that is being put forth and that there is more than one person working on the case. Introduce your legal assistant and explain what she does. Introduce other people who are working on the case and explain that their efforts are necessary; to go toe-to-toe with the multi-billion dollar insurance company that is contesting the claim.

## PERSONAL INTEREST

Nobody likes to be thought of as a number. I think many clients would be offended by the thought that their cases are being "processed" or that they were obtained through "marketing efforts." Try to remember that clients are real people with real injuries and concerns, and that your clients are paying a lot of money for the professional services of an attorney.

Clients need to be told their case is important. We let our clients know that we only handle personal injury cases and that we don't take every case that is referred to our firm. We let clients know we have taken their case because it has merit and we think they should be compensated for what has happened to them.

Realistically, the attorney will probably not have a large number of personal contacts with each client. It is important to make those contacts special. It's easy to get rushed and to question your clients like Joe Friday asking for "just the facts, ma'am." If that's all you ask for that's all you'll get. However, if you get to know your clients and find out about their family, their work, and the things that interest them, you will do a better job. It may be easy for an arbitrator or a jury to make a small award on a "soft tissue neck case." It is a lot harder to shortchange a real person that the jury or arbitrator has gotten to know and whose injury affects that person's job, his or her recreation, and his or her future.

## VIGOROUS ADVOCACY

I am convinced that at the initial client meeting many clients don't want to hear about mediation, alternative dispute resolution, or how their case will be negotiated and settled out of court. I believe that clients want to know that you can be a mean SOB if necessary. At the initial client

meeting I seek a commitment from the client that they are willing to go through a trial or arbitration if it is necessary to get a fair result. Once the client knows you will be tough if necessary, then the client is in a better frame of mind to hear about alternate dispute resolution options.

## REALISTIC ADVICE

Some lawyers talk about "client control" as if their clients were unruly animals that need to be "controlled." I think most clients want their cases investigated, their legal options explained, and realistic advice given. If you work hard to provide realistic advice and conduct yourself in a professional manner then you should have few "client control" problems.

When you are ready to evaluate a case and discuss settlement figures I suggest that you have a face-to-face meeting with the client. At this meeting I talk for about one-half hour detailing for the client how we arrived at the proposed settlement figures. I want the client to know how many different factors were considered before giving a settlement figure so that the client will feel comfortable with the value we have placed on his or her case. When that next door neighbor says the case is worth "at least a million" the client will know who to believe. Since initiating this procedure several years ago, I have not had a single client question or disagree with the value we placed on his or her case.

## CLIENTS WANT RESULTS

Like anybody, clients want a favorable outcome in their case. Work hard to get it.

I'm not anti-marketing. It is important to let others know about your law practice and what kind of cases you handle. However, I think it is too easy to look at marketing as a short-cut to building a solid law practice.

The way to get more and better cases is straightforward. Work hard, get good results, and let your clients know you obtained a good result for them. Word travels.

HAVE A VALUABLE "PRACTICE TIP" THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE WITH WSTLA MEMBERS? PLEASE CALL BOB DAWSON (624-5000) WITH YOUR THOUGHTS. REMEMBER, YOUR PRACTICE TIP MAY RELATE TO SUBSTANTIVE LAW, PROCEDURE, OR LAW OFFICE MANAGEMENT.

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