

The first step to building exceptional relationships

Taking a technology-led approach to relationship planning can allow firms to develop stronger long-term connections with clients, advises **Dave Harris**



Dave Harris is principal consultant at LexisNexis Enterprise Solutions www.lexisnexis-es.co.uk @LexisNexisES

Trustworthy and credible relationships have largely defined the success of many lawyers and partners, with some even being crowned as rainmakers in their firms. While the traditional approach to developing relationships (seminars, networking, events, etc) has worked well thus far, anecdotal evidence suggests that this is no longer enough.

In today's world of extreme competition, globalisation, multi-generational workforces, alternative legal services delivery, and billing models, a short-term, quick-fix, and narrow approach to relationship building is increasingly becoming ineffective.

Client relationships for the long term hinge on firms' ability to develop true, trusted partnerships with their client organisations. Clients want their lawyers to 'horizon scan' on their

behalf, continuously re-evaluate the risks to their organisation, and proactively put forth a strategy to mitigate any threats to the core function of their organisation's business.

Such an approach creates exceptional relationships with clients, but the first step to this end is relationship planning. Many firms in this context talk about the fact that they have appointed a client relationship partner whose responsibility is to strengthen and nurture client relationships. In reality, this appointment often has no method behind it that creates value for the client and can be based on purely financial or other such reasons.

There are some fundamental areas that firms should focus on to develop exceptional relationships. By supporting these areas with technology, relationship planning then becomes routine and standard practice in the firm.

Clients' business needs

Lawyers cannot proactively understand their clients' requirements merely by focusing on the live matters at hand or monitoring news announcements from their organisations.

Firms need to plan for the changing requirements of the client's business and they're only going to get that intelligence from deep discussions with the client. The client, on the other

hand, needs to trust the firm to share this information in the first place.

So, how to understand clients' need is equally important. It requires an investigative approach supported by a well-ingrained process that enables lawyers to access pertinent information in a timely manner. This in turn demands a culture of sharing in the firm, which is facilitated by technology like customer relationship management (CRM) systems.

A small piece of insight needed to capture the client's interest may well be in a colleague's head, or buried deep within an article that the lawyer read somewhere. If this kind of information is inputted into the CRM system, it can often serve as a clue for another lawyer in the firm pursuing a meaningful client relationship.

Define the ideal relationship

If a firm rated its relationships with individual clients and their organisations on a scale of zero to 100, would the score be satisfactory?

Firms must define what their ideal relationship with clients should look like – it can be anything from the firm being the first port of call for any new matters, unwavering recommendations of the firm to prospects, demonstration of trust and confidence in the legal team, and so on.

With such a definition in place, firms can then leverage technology to plan their relationship-building approach to achieve these exceptional relationships. CRM systems measure engagement by collating information on past engagements and combining it with the relationship intelligence that already exists in the technology – at the same time quantifying the strength of the relationships. This in turn allows lawyers and firms alike to identify the gaps in client relationships, which can then be rectified based on the strategic objectives of the business.

In doing so, firms ensure that the relationship planning closely ties in with their strategic business objectives. Additionally, due to the resulting strength of the relationship as a consequence of relationship planning, firms can establish a unique identity for each of their practices or departments – making the umbrella brand of the legal services providers irrelevant. Today almost every firm is perceived as a jack of all trades, as it's difficult to differentiate one from the other.

With a technology-led approach to relationship planning, firms can institutionalise their client relationships to ensure continuity – regardless of their current and future employees, lawyers, practice teams, or business leaders. **SJ**