What Clients Want from Law Firms

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Chapter 13:
The strategic necessity of personalized client relationships

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In an era where the legal sector is increasingly driven by technology and efficiency, law firms must recognize that the human element is a critical component for success. Personalized client relationships are a strategic necessity that can shape a firm's reputation and long-term trajectory.

Clients are demanding more from their legal advisers, seeking partners who understand their needs, communicate transparently, and offer genuine care. This personal touch is a key factor in building trust and long-lasting relationships. For law firms, the rationale is clear – those who invest in creating a personalized service will not only enhance client satisfaction but also gain a competitive edge.

Traditionally, many areas of the legal profession have been seen as transactional, with service delivery focused on resolving specific legal issues, rather than building long-term, personal relationships. Until recently, this saw many law firms offering a matter-based service model, delivered through professional specialism silos, rather than a holistic approach. There has been a fundamental shift in recent years, driven by changing client demands.

Expectations and service standard demands have been driven by retail and online brands, setting new benchmarks. New technology has helped drive this – it has also helped address the previous imbalance in the flow of information. Clients now have access to more information, a wider range of choices, and public platforms to express dissatisfaction if they are unhappy.

This has translated into a shift in the power dynamic between client and lawyer. Firms are expected to prioritize client care, with clients demanding greater transparency and enhanced service from providers.

Clients are increasingly looking for legal partners who can offer more than just technical advice. They want strategic partners who understand their industry, or personal situation, anticipate potential issues, and work collaboratively.

Against this backdrop, the evidence shows that firms stand out when they commit to developing relationships founded on an understanding of a client's individual needs – this fosters trust and loyalty, which in turn builds and reinforces their reputation. A client who feels genuinely cared for is more likely to remain loyal to a firm, recommend its services, and return for future legal needs. In this way, personalized service can become a competitive differentiator in a crowded marketplace.

Clients receiving positive experiences and outcomes can swiftly become advocates, harnessing public platforms such as review sites and social media – that can so easily be weaponized by dissatisfied clients – to deliver powerful testimonials.

Research from social psychology[1] illustrates that people often form interpersonal connections with brands that exhibit similar dynamics to those in their personal life. These relationships involve reciprocal exchanges that provide tangible benefits, including a sense of perceived commitment. There are some obvious fundamentals that apply universally – the importance of honesty, being treated as an individual, and keeping promises in order to build trust.

Personalized service provision by a law firm involves taking a proactive approach towards understanding client concerns, offering support, and delivering an experience that addresses the unique needs and preferences of each client.

Just as clients have different needs and expectations in their different personal relationships, so they may want and expect different things from their different organizational relationships, requiring sensitivity to establish exactly how they would like the relationship framed.

Clients are looking for more than just legal outcomes – they seek partners who care about them and are focused on their wellbeing, whether that is to achieve a positive financial outcome or by providing considerate social interaction during any exchanges. As the *Harvard Business Review*[2] notes, trust-based relationships lead to long-term success because they go beyond the immediate transaction and reflect the firm's commitment to its clients as individuals.

Fundamentally, this is grounded in the culture of the firm, as the right culture has a direct impact on a firm's ability to deliver personalized client care. McKinsey's[3] report on organizational culture emphasizes the importance of leadership in shaping workplace culture. Law firm leaders must actively promote values that encourage and enable staff to build relationships, such as open communication, respect for clients, and professional development.

Building a culture that instils a sense of "psychological safety"[4] for staff will pay dividends in client care, as staff will feel confident in sharing problems or making mistakes, without fear of embarrassment or criticism, knowing they will be supported to learn or change in pursuit of improvement.

Demonstrating that the firm values teamwork, empathy, and collaboration not only improves employee satisfaction but also creates a ripple effect that enhances the client experience and helps ensure that client care remains at the forefront of everyday practice.

Firms that foster this sort of positive, supportive workplace will create an environment where employees naturally go the extra mile for their clients. Conversely, firms that neglect their internal culture often see higher turnover rates, lower employee engagement, and poorer client care outcomes as a result.

Gallup[5] research on employee engagement shows a direct link between how employees feel about their workplace and how they treat clients. Engaged employees are more motivated to provide exceptional client service, whereas disengaged employees may prioritize tasks over relationships.

Investing in people development is not just about improving technical legal skills – it's about fostering the interpersonal skills that lawyers need to provide high-quality client care. Law firms that prioritize training and development in these areas can create a workforce capable of building strong, lasting relationships with clients.

A client-centric culture – the foundation of personalized relationship building

Client-centric businesses across industries, including legal services, consistently outperform their competitors in terms of retention and profitability, according to research by the Chartered Institute of Marketing.[6]

But many organizations, including law firms, often fail to distinguish between client service, client experience, and true client centricity. While client service focuses on meeting immediate needs, and client experience focuses on interactions throughout the service journey, client-centricity demands a more fundamental shift. It requires rethinking how the firm operates at every level, ensuring that the client's interests are the driving force behind all decisions and actions.

Becoming truly client-centric involves aligning the firm's culture, processes, and values around the client's needs, placing their perspective into every facet of the firm's operations. This type of culture encourages every employee, from fee earners to administrative staff, to put the client at the heart of all decision making. Having a client-centric approach as a central ethos is essential for law firms striving to create a consistent, personalized experience that fosters deep, long-term client relationships.

This central ethos can only grow and be sustained if it is developed and led from the top, promoted at every level, and supported from the bottom up. Leaders need to actively promote policies and behaviors that prioritize the client experience. Also essential is multi-directional listening that analyses and reacts to feedback from all staff within the firm. According to the McKinsey report,[7] organizations with a strong client-centric culture have leadership that champions client-focused initiatives, empowers employees to make decisions with the client in mind, and rewards behaviors that improve client satisfaction.

To further reinforce a client-centric culture, some of the SME law firms in our collaborative network have introduced tangible ways to ensure the client's perspective is never overlooked in decision-making. For example, having a designated "voice of the client" champion in meetings ensures that the client's views and experiences are actively represented. In some cases, firms have gone a step further by placing an empty chair or a place card at meetings to symbolize the client's presence, serving as a visual reminder that every decision must consider its impact on the client. These simple yet powerful gestures help embed client considerations into the firm's daily operations and strategic planning.

Consistency is critical in developing and maintaining a client-centric culture, the Chartered Institute of Marketing research[8] found. It's not enough to adopt a client-first approach at only certain points in the client journey – it must be a continuous commitment across all touchpoints, from the initial client interaction and enquiry to the final resolution of a case. Adopting this approach will take firms to the next level, better able to meet client needs and leading to stronger, more enduring client relationships.

Law firms can cultivate such a culture by critically reviewing every process and client touchpoint, identifying improvement opportunities and investing in tactics and training programs that emphasize client engagement to foster an environment where empathy and communication are valued.

We have observed concrete benefits from adopting a client-focused approach across the firms in our network. Each firm is required to meet and maintain our ISO standard, which includes a key metric for client care, known as the LawNet Excellence Mark. Maintaining this standard involves participating in external assessments of the client experience, which offers our members a clearer view of how clients perceive their journey and where improvements may be needed, complementing the firm's own internal research.

The assessment includes both in-depth client experience evaluations – using anonymous walk-ins, telephone, and online visits – and digital satisfaction surveys. Each year, the feedback gathered from the client experience reviews is used to inform decisions on improvement initiatives, training, and ongoing development within member firms. Over the past 11 years, this has become the largest client experience research initiative within the UK legal sector, with close to 10,000 experience reviews and almost 100,000 satisfaction surveys completed, providing a substantial source of data and insights for continuous enhancement.[9]

Measuring and evaluating client experience and its impact on a firm's success presents several challenges, but it's only through a comprehensive review of performance that genuine improvements can be made. The evidence shows this holistic approach leads to substantial gains – by implementing targeted actions and focused training, firms saw their average score in client experience reviews rise from 52 percent in the project's first year back in 2013 to 76 percent in 2023/24, with our highest performing firms scoring up to 88 percent.

This positions our member firms well above the sector average, indeed between 30 and 50 percent higher depending on the enquiry entry point, with telephone calls consistently more challenging for firms throughout the sector. But, while LawNet's efforts have positioned the network well ahead of their competitors, potential clients often measure service quality against top-rated consumer organizations in wholly different sectors. It is no longer enough to be excellent at what you do compared with your peers – firms today must match up to retailers and other consumer-facing companies such as John Lewis, Nationwide Building Society, and key-cutting, shoe repairing Timpson. These organizations held the top three slots in the July 2024 UK Customer Satisfaction Index (UKCSI)[10] ranking, with an 85 percent+ satisfaction rating.

We see the customer-centric focus reflected in the storytelling of these major brands. John Lewis' iconic Christmas adverts, for example, never focus on products but rather evoke emotions and feelings. Similarly, banks discuss the life changes that come with buying a home rather than focusing on mortgage rates, and Nationwide emphasizes its community focus, how it is keeping open its local branches.

This kind of storytelling seeks to connect with customers at an emotional level, by demonstrating a deep understanding of what really matters to them and the focus of their journey with the organization. It embodies client-centricity and personalized experience and can lead to stronger client engagement. It applies equally to consumer and business clients, who, despite their professional roles, are individuals with their own emotions, fears, and aspirations. It demonstrates the importance of empathy.

Empathy and understanding – the human element in legal services

Empathy is a vital component of client-centric legal service delivery and too often is overlooked in the race towards matter completion and the balancing of finite resources against client demands. But when lawyers understand the emotional and practical challenges their clients face, this can create a fundamental shift in the overall client experience. Law firms that encourage empathy in client interactions create an environment where clients feel heard and understood. This personal connection can reduce client anxiety, especially in high-stress legal situations. As Daniel Goleman's[11] research on emotional intelligence suggests, the ability to recognize and manage emotions in both oneself and others is key to building meaningful relationships. In legal services, empathy enables lawyers to see beyond the legal problem and consider the person behind the case.

The relationship-building skills of fee earners – lawyers, partners, and other client-facing professionals – are increasingly recognized as critical to the success of law firms.[12] Clients want more than just technical expertise – they want to work with professionals who can build rapport, understand their business, and offer strategic advice that goes beyond legal problem-solving. Developing these relationship skills can significantly enhance a lawyer's ability to attract and retain clients, the evidence for which is growing.

Research by the US-based Association of Corporate Counsel[13] found that clients value lawyers who demonstrate genuine concern for their wellbeing, not just those who are skilled in legal matters. Developing emotional intelligence in lawyers, particularly in client-facing roles, enhances the firm's reputation for personalized client care.

The Legal Education and Training Review[14] (a joint project between the Solicitors Regulation Authority, the Bar Standards Board, and ILEX Professional Standards) reports that law firms are placing greater emphasis on developing "soft skills" such as communication, emotional intelligence, and relationship management. These skills are now considered just as important as legal knowledge. Stanford Law School's[15] work in this area highlights that lawyers who excel in client relationships are those who actively invest in understanding their clients' businesses and personal circumstances, positioning themselves as trusted advisors rather than just service providers.

By cultivating empathy and communication skills among their fee earners, law firms can differentiate themselves and build deeper connections with clients. A firm that listens and responds empathetically is more likely to earn client loyalty and foster long-term relationships, crucial for retaining business in a competitive marketplace.

This reflects the growing need for businesses to adopt a more personalized approach in skills development focused on individual client care. One effective method is to step into the client's shoes to pinpoint areas where the skills of a fee earner could be enhanced. Many firms in our network use the audio recordings of conversations between customer experience researchers and fee earners to identify skill gaps. This has led to the creation of resources such as crib sheets to support both fee earners and support staff during client interactions, ensuring a consistently high standard of service together with structured learning to develop targeted skills where needed.

Further evidence of the value of building empathetic connections through skills development is reflected in the improvements observed by our network member firms when they focus on enhancing their lawyers' communication skills. Sales is an area where many lawyers feel out of their depth, often unsure how to communicate the value of their firm in terms of expertise and service rather than cost. There can also be reluctance to pursue potential business opportunities, with follow-up consistently the lowest scoring area in client experience reviews. However, when lawyers receive the appropriate training and support in these skills, feedback indicates that potential clients are more confident in making decisions. This not only fosters empathetic engagement but also significantly improves the overall client experience, leading to stronger, more valuable relationships.

Another way to build stronger relationships is to take a more individualized route to matching fee earners with clients, with some firms in the sector using psychometric models and formalized, data-driven approaches. But one of our member firms is conducting an innovative trial that uses a simple, human-based approach for match-making new client instructions with those fee earners deemed the best fit. A central team receives the instruction and builds an understanding of the client's approach and communication preferences, after which they work with the relevant department to agree the best match, bearing in mind both individual styles and availability. This offers a practical and low-investment way to trial the process and identify potential issues. Like psychometric profiling, it aims to give those critical client/lawyer relationships the best chance of success from the outset.

Employees equipped with strong communication skills can become powerful advocates for the firm, delivering a service that exceeds expectations, especially when they are given the autonomy to do so. CEOs from our member firms have shared the importance of empowering staff in this way, granting them the freedom to go above and beyond for clients. The results have ranged from encouraging employees to openly share what they value about working for the firm, to more tangible client outcomes, like a private client lawyer who felt able to head to the supermarket on Christmas Eve after discovering a vulnerable client had no groceries and didn't know how to order online.

Developing such skills can also help foster a healthy working environment in which staff feel comfortable asking questions, learning from mistakes, and building the confidence they need to improve. This sense of psychological safety allows employees to approach client service with creativity and innovation.

Law firms that prioritize the professional growth of their employees, offering mentorship, training, and career development opportunities, are more likely to foster a client-centric culture. This, in turn, strengthens client relationships, leading to higher levels of client satisfaction and retention, according to research by the CIPD.[16]

Building trust through transparent communication and efficient processes

Open, timely, and regular communication is essential for building trust in any professional relationship, particularly in legal services, where clients are often dealing with complex and stressful issues. Clients want clear, honest communication about their case status, legal options, and cost implications.[17] By providing consistent updates and explaining processes in plain language, law firms can alleviate client anxiety and generate confidence in how their case is being handled.

LexisNexis[18] research shows that clients frequently express frustration when they feel kept in the dark about progress on their case. Miscommunication, delayed updates, or lack of communication altogether are some of the top reasons clients switch legal providers. Ensuring transparent, regular, and proactive communication can prevent misunderstandings and set realistic expectations. Clients who feel informed are more likely to trust their legal team and remain loyal, particularly during prolonged or challenging cases.

In today's fast-paced and individualistic environment, clients expect communication and engagement on their own terms, through the channels and locations they prefer. They want businesses to meet them in their chosen spaces, whether virtual or physical. A good example of this is seen in our member firms adopting platforms that would not be traditional marketing avenues or communication routes, such as social media or app-based channels. Clients also want flexibility in timing, and we've observed firms responding by offering services during hours that would previously have been considered outside the norm.

Changing expectations are also driving a shift towards more streamlined, customer-centric onboarding processes within our member firms. At a recent leadership forum we hosted on customer experience, it was the key topic. One managing partner highlighted a major project aimed at automating each step to enhance the client's experience, rather than focusing solely on what was easiest for the firm. The core philosophy was about "putting ourselves in the shoes of our clients".

We have seen this approach across our network, with many adopting technology to improve the client experience. The use of cutting-edge identity verification platforms is having a significant impact on this experience, ensuring a seamless process that can be completed in a matter of a few minutes.

Leveraging technology to enhance client care

We're witnessing the potential of technological advancements to profoundly impact all areas of our lives, including the delivery of legal services, with tools already available to improve efficiency, streamline processes, and enhance communication. Clients expect prompt and professional service when they engage with law firms, making efficient onboarding and ongoing case management processes crucial.

However, law firms must strike a balance between using technology to enhance individual client care and potential overuse in ways that might depersonalize client interactions. Clients still value the human touch in their legal matters, and technology should be used to support this.

A study in the US by the International Legal Technology Association[19] highlights how law firms are increasingly adopting automation for routine tasks like document management, billing, and client onboarding. They found this can enhance client interactions by speeding up processes, reducing human error, and freeing up time for lawyers to focus on strategic client interactions, resulting in higher client satisfaction levels. However, it also found that relying too heavily on automated solutions can risk losing the personal touch that clients expect, such as regular personal updates or nuanced advice tailored to their specific situation.

The use of AI and technology in the law is drawing wide-ranging and occasionally heated debate.[20] Advocates highlight that advanced technology can enhance client service by providing data-driven insights and faster service. Others warn that over-automation could lead to alienating clients who prefer more direct, personal communication. The key is to find a balance where technology brings efficiency but leaves human interaction at the core of the client relationship, ensuring that personalized interaction is preserved even in a tech-driven environment.

The theme for our Excellence Mark program of client experience support to our member firms in the coming year is "Next Generation Excellence". This aligns to the primary focus for many of our firms, which is on the introduction of further digital tools and AI integration, while reinforcing and enhancing personalization of the client experience at every opportunity.

In embracing this approach, firms are encouraged to focus on personalization in client care that extends beyond improving initial interactions and automating efficiency. While technology, such as AI-driven task prioritization or enhanced digital systems, can streamline processes, true personalization requires deeper analysis of the data these systems generate. The real value lies in how this information is used to shape and enhance the next stage of the client journey.

Personalization becomes impactful when firms act on insights gathered not only from automated systems but also from more nuanced feedback like Net Promoter Scores, which indicate whether clients would recommend the firm. Often, clients may rate a firm's legal services highly but still hesitate to refer others due to a lack of personal connection. To bridge this gap, firms must take proactive steps to improve client engagement, reinforcing their commitment to a client-centric culture.

To enhance personalization, the emphasis should be on what happens after the initial interaction – the second step. It's about making follow-up actions intuitive, engaging, and memorable. The real opportunity for personalization comes from building rapport and delivering an experience that goes beyond basic expectations, ensuring clients feel valued and happy to recommend the firm.

The future of personalization in the legal landscape

As law firms continue to adopt new technologies, the future of personalized client care in legal services will be shaped by how firms balance innovation with the human touch. Client expectations are evolving rapidly, and firms that can adapt to these changes while maintaining strong personal relationships will stand out in a competitive market. One of the key challenges lies in using technology as a tool to enhance, rather than undermine, client-focused care.

Reports by PwC[21] forecast that the legal profession will see increasing integration of artificial intelligence, blockchain, and other emerging technologies. These advancements will allow law firms to automate more administrative tasks, provide more data-driven legal insights, and offer faster service. However, the importance of human relationships in law – built on trust, empathy, and understanding – will remain a fundamental aspect of successful legal practice.

Future-proofing client relationships requires law firms to stay adaptable, keeping pace with technological advancements while maintaining the ability to connect with clients on a human level through personalized, attentive service, even as both sides benefit from the efficiencies brought by technology. As the Law Society[22] predicted in a recent report, the firms that succeed will be those that recognize that, despite all technological advances, the legal profession remains a people-centered business.

There is evidence that the sector is aware and adapting to the challenge. A recent report[23] highlights that nearly 80 percent of SME law firms expect to drive revenue growth in 2025 by placing client experience at the forefront of their strategies, on equal standing with digital-first approaches.

The most successful law firms of the future will recognize that personalized client service is crucial and the result of a firm-wide virtuous circle. Investing in people development – by fostering empathy and instilling a client-first mindset – combined with a strategic commitment to creating a client-centric culture, will drive the personalized care that strengthens client loyalty and fuels the firm's success.

This is what will determine which firms thrive in an increasingly competitive landscape.

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Research shows that most lawyers think they know what their clients want – but their clients don't always agree. How can lawyers and their firms truly understand the client perspective? How can they know what their clients are really asking for? What do lawyers need to know in order to get – and stay – hired?

What Clients Want from Law Firms combines the collective perspectives of clients in order to focus the lawyer's mind on their end goal – providing a service that people want and will pay for. Exploring dynamic new approaches to the client–lawyer relationship, the contributors take on topics as broad as business skills, diversity, panel management and AI, revealing what clients really want from law firms.

Written from the perspective of those who engage law firms in their business – and from sectors as diverse as banking, sport, and entertainment – this book explores the importance of client relationships, listening and understanding problems, and what clients really want from their trusted advisors.

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