

# SEVEN TIPS FOR A SOLO PRACTITIONER ON HOW TO MAINTAIN GOOD CLIENT RELATIONS

by Brian Pedigo

Maintaining good client relations is critical in any service industry. As a solo practitioner, it's important to maintain good client relations because (1) your clients are a huge future referral source, (2) your clients are the reason you get paid (now or later), and (3) happy clients are low-maintenance clients.

The following are some hopefully useful tips, suggestions, or already known reminders about maintaining good client relations.

## 1. Promptly Return Phone Calls and Emails

We've all heard it countless times – one of the biggest complaints the State Bar gets is, "My lawyer doesn't return my phone calls." If you have an agenda or to-do list, make sure you keep entries for who needs a call back. Contacting your clients in a timely manner helps them feel that you care about their matter and care about them. If you have particular clients who are "high maintenance," sometimes this will require putting up creative boundaries to protect your time and your sanity. However, for the most part, good clients ask questions only when necessary. Make it a priority to call or write them back.

One more word on phone systems – if you have a third-party human answering your phones, you may want to ask your clients for feedback on how they feel about that service. You may also want to call your own number yourself and see how you're treated. I have spoken to a countless number of third-party answering services that treated me either rudely or like I was an unfamiliar stranger, when the fact is that I had a familiar relationship with some of the lawyers I was trying to reach. Sometimes a prerecorded voicemail is better than a third-party answering service. In fact, it's my opinion that a prerecorded voicemail is usually much better than having to tell someone who doesn't know me "the purpose of my call."

## 2. Allow More Client Input

Back in our law school days, we may have heard that we "steer the ship" as the attorneys during litigation. Although we're in control of the case, it makes sense to allow your clients to make certain decisions in their own matter. Always keep in the forefront of your mind what your client ultimately wants. Explain to your client the multiple paths that can be taken to reach those goals and let the client have input in which path to take; in the end, it should make for a better attorney-client relationship.

You're a zealous advocate for your clients' interests and legal rights. Let them know what those rights are and give them more ownership of the direction their case is going. One little thing that I do is make sure each and every client is ready and willing to pay his or her own filing fees up front. I don't advance filing costs, primarily because I want the client to take early ownership of the seriousness and commitment of filing pleadings with the court. Allowing the client to contribute to his or own case makes the attorney-client relationship more balanced.

## 3. Send Frequent Updates

Sending frequent status updates to your clients helps them feel that you are diligently and actively working on their matter. It shows them, again, that you care. To keep costs down, you may want to encourage clients to communicate with you via email, which allows you to attach documents for their own personal file at minimal cost.

## 4. If You Make a Mistake, Admit It and Apologize

A lot of attorneys have liability paranoia. Sometimes that's for good reason. Sometimes not. If you make an error (we all do), your client will probably learn of it sooner or later. Be the first one to step up and admit your mistake. Apologize for your error. Unless the error resulted in the dismissal of the case, the client will likely forgive you and all will be well.

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Humility and truthfulness are more desirable traits than feigned perfection. Acting like a real-life human with your clients should enhance your attorney-client relationships.

## 5. Actively Empathize

Empathy is understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another. Expressing empathy is hard work – and we, as lawyers, were not specifically trained for this, either. Our clients want us to hear and understand their plight, their experience, and their story – so sometimes all we have to do is listen to that story.

Client: “My jerk neighbor keeps playing loud music 24/7 while I’m trying to sleep; he won’t knock it off even after I repeatedly ask!” Attorney: “That would be so frustrating, not to be able to sleep in your own home because of the inconsiderate actions of your neighbor. I understand that you want this to stop.”

Putting in the added time and work of actively listening and empathizing is a crucial ingredient to maintaining good client relations.

## 6. Don’t Nickel-and-Dime

For those of us billing for our time in hourly fee cases, it is critically important to not charge for small, trivial things. I recently had personal experience with this after the death of my father-in-law. The family had to retain a

Texas lawyer to help with estate administration. To the family’s surprise, every time a phone call was made (even a 15-second confirmation or reminder call), it would be billed out at the minimum 0.1 hour. Small email reminders and calls added up to the hundreds of dollars on the first invoice. Sending an invoice for these unexpected costs was like a punch in the face – not good for client relations. Make sure your hourly rate is enough to cover the inconsequential losses of a minute or two that you’re bound to incur on any matter. Look at the big picture and don’t try to squeeze money out of every opportunity. If you do, the client will notice, and the client will not like it.

## 7. Take care of yourself

If you’re tired, stressed out, and overworked, you’re going to have a hard time maintaining good client relations – let alone any relationship. You have to take care of good old number one. Force yourself to find a time when you can set work aside and do whatever you love to do. Be with people you enjoy, and remember that legal advocacy is not your entire life. If you’re able to sound genuinely rested, happy, and ready to help others, this will play a large part in keeping good, healthy client relationships alive.

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