



MAKE YOUR FIRM HASSLE-PROOF FOR PROSPECTS AND CLIENTS

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I had an experience last week which prompted the writing of this article. I wish I could say it is a rare experience, but I can't. I wish I could say it is the first such experience, but it isn't. I wish I could even say it happens just once a month or even once a week, but I can't. In fact, I would be willing to bet that you've had a similar experience within the past month or week, too.

It was a bit of a special weeknight, because my stepdaughter was home on winter break from college, and was due to arrive with her dad any minute. We were planning on sharing a precious few days together, beginning with a wonderful dinner at her favorite restaurant. Just minutes before their arrival, I heard a familiar high-pitched chirp. After checking floor by floor, I identified that the back-up smoke detector on the bedroom level was the culprit. Time to change the battery.

Minutes later husband and stepdaughter arrived. After hugs and kisses, I asked hubby to change the battery before dinner. I always did it in my last house, but the ceilings in this house are much higher, and I can't reach without the extra high ladder. I don't like schlepping it in from the garage, let alone climbing up that high if I can avoid it. So although hubby is not very handy, and in fact gets very anxious about doing anything which involves tools, anything mechanical, or even duct tape, I asked him to change the battery.

In hindsight, we realize now that the battery he put in was also dead. But since I am careful about using the oldest batteries first, that didn't occur to us. Hubby diligently replaced the battery. But the chirping persisted. I was downstairs catching up on the latest news, so did not realize that hubby was about to make a bad move. He saw another smoke detector nearby on the same ceiling, and thought it possible that it, too, might need a battery. So he opened it.

Had I been watching, I would have told him not to touch the other detector. That one is hard wired into our home alarm protection service. So when he opened it, he tripped the alarm, which immediately began screeching. Hubby panicked. He put the cover back on, and as it did not stop the screeching, he assumed he had broken it. I heard the phone ring, and realized it was the alarm company.

The customer service representative on the other end of the line explained that the fire alarm had been triggered, and she was checking before dispatching the fire company. I told her what had transpired. She immediately stated that my husband must have damaged the alarm to prevent the system from being reset.

Meanwhile, hubby is now running around the house to the back-up fire alarms on each level and replacing all batteries, thinking that will turn off the deafening noise. He keeps shouting to no one in particular that this is exactly why he never tries to do anything mechanical. The representative insists on speaking to him. I tell her nicely that is not a good idea. She insists. Apparently, as soon as hubby is on the phone she begins to cross-examine him about exactly what he did, and accuses him of damaging their equipment.

He has that unmistakable “deer in the headlights” look I know so well. He keeps repeating to her that he is sure he did nothing but open and reclose their detector, and that it closed properly. I insist on taking the telephone back.

“How do we stop this noise, so we can get to dinner?” I ask. “Well,” she says, “I can just walk you through putting in your alarm code to turn it off. If your husband didn’t damage the system, the noise will stop. Otherwise, we will have to take the entire system down. And I won’t be able to send a technician out for a week to get it restarted.”

Ok, we have a possible solution, but the problem is I don’t have the alarm code memorized. I know it is written down. In fact, when I bought my home, the alarm company sent someone out to “train” me on the system. He wanted to get home after a long day — I was his last stop — and he spoke as quickly as humanly possible. I took 18 legal-size pages of notes in the 20 to 30 minutes of instruction. My conclusion was that there was no way that my husband would ever be able to work the system, given its complexity. So I never actually armed the system in the 3 years I’ve been here. However, I at least had the peace of mind knowing that the smoke and flood alarms were always active.

I did a fast search of the two possible locations where I might find my notes, while the representative stayed on the line. The entire time I searched, she berated me for not using the system, for not knowing what my code was, for tampering with their equipment, and for not knowing where my notes were. After I realized that I could not find the paperwork, my nerves were shot, hubby was still in panic mode, and stepdaughter appeared about to faint from hunger, I finally reached my limit of endurance. I sharply barked into the phone, “This dialog is NOT helpful. Tell me how to take the system down, and what that means in terms of what coverage I will



be losing, what it will cost to bring it back up with an on-site technician, and why there has to be a week delay.”

There is much more to the story in terms of the continuing annoying dialog in getting the system down. But for the sake of brevity, let me just say that she continued to criticize, and made the process much more stressful than it had to be. As it turned out, there was an opening for the technician to come the next morning by 10 am, and there was only a \$25 co-pay.

The technician arrived promptly the next day. He has been here many times making repairs to one aspect of the system or another, so we’ve developed a cordial rapport. Under calmer circumstances I was able to recall the code, which he tested and found to work perfectly. My husband had not harmed their unit at all. So within minutes the system was back up and running, at only a \$25 cost.

In frustration, I relayed just the part of the conversation about powering down the system, and how she berated me for not being able to immediately follow her instructions. He was amazed. My panel is filled with numerous systems (network, phone, alarm, intercom, internet, security cameras etc) and he told me that anyone, even a new technician with their own company, would have difficulty identifying the right wires to disconnect.

While he was at the house, he showed me how to arm and unarm the system. Oh my goodness, it was so easy I almost fell over. I can’t for the life of me figure out what the other person had relayed that caused me to take 18 pages of notes. I guess once I find them I will know.

Ok, this has been a long story to make a short but vitally important point. Think about how often you’ve had similar interactions with companies you deal with. Whether at home, at the office, at a local store, or even through the internet, we are constantly battling our way through what should be simple interactions, just to get to an acceptable conclusion.

It happens so often, that sometimes I feel there’s no fight left in me; and I’m quite the scrapper, truth be told! Admit it, sometimes you just agree to forget the warranty, or accept shoddy workmanship, or avoid trying to get your refund, just because you don’t have the energy for another unnecessary but inevitable battle.

I often find myself calculating in my head how much time will be required to resolve whatever it is, and comparing it to how much I would otherwise earn if the time were spent on client work. More often, lately, economics guide my actions, rather than what is rightfully due me. I’m guessing that’s your reality as well.

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My belief is that some companies bank on it. They make it difficult to deal with them on purpose, knowing that most people nowadays will just give up and go away. And we do go away, don't we? Unless they're essential, in which case we just "take it" and interact with them as little as possible, at least until a competitor comes along, and then we're gone in a flash.

Now let's make this dialog (diatribe?) relevant to your law practice. Truth be told, with so much competition for client work, you can't afford to be a difficult organization to deal with. Clients just won't put up with it. You have to do everything within your power to make your firm "user friendly" for clients and prospects. Unfortunately, a lot of you are not as user friendly as you think you are. In fact, you may have inadvertently (unconsciously?) put on blinders which prevent you from seeing the obstacles you present for clients and prospects. Trust me on this, I see it all the time.

Here's a simple example. Look at your web site. You have areas of practice. You have attorney profiles. On the attorney profiles you probably list the areas of practice for that attorney. But in the areas of practice, most firms don't list the attorneys for the practice area. That means a prospect has to start reading attorney profiles one by one to find out who to call, and to review their credentials. And if they want to contact the department chair, that may or may not be included on any profile.

Here's another example. At many of the firms I contact, the receptionist screens the call. Not all clients or prospects feel comfortable explaining "what this call is about" to a receptionist. Then, when the caller is then connected to a secretary who proceeds to ask all the same questions, it's rubbing salt into the wound. Prospects and clients like that as much as I like having to key in my 15-digit account number on the phone just to get connected to a customer service rep, only to be asked immediately by that representative what my account number is. Doh!

Here's another example. Some web sites list several office locations. In several practice area descriptions some sites mention free initial consultations. But when a prospect calls they are sometimes surprised—and annoyed—to find that the firm provides the free consultation only at a different office than the one near the prospect. Doh!

Don't even get me started about some of your voicemail systems, which are so poorly programmed that they are literally hostile to callers. I get disconnected daily from systems because I didn't key in the right menu code to connect to the desired



party's extension. Hey, how about a second chance? How about a chance to zero out to the operator?

Do you give new clients folders in which to file all the papers you send, so they can stay organized? Do you explain things in words *they* will understand? Do your bills and statements have sufficient organization, headers, subtotals, totals, descriptions and summaries to make it easy for your clients to know what they owe, and to evaluate the *value received* as compared to the price charged?

I could probably continue for pages with additional examples of the roadblocks to easy interaction which many firms erect. But if I do so, our editor will have the unnecessary and stressful job of having to determine what to cut from this article. And I am already in her debt for having turned last month's article from a rabid dog into one of the most successful—in terms of feedback—ever. So it's time to bring this to a conclusion.

It is highly unlikely that there are *not* aspects of your firm which can be made more user-friendly for clients and prospects. Ask your staff for their insights and recommendations. They usually see them clearly. Ask your clients with a simple survey. Ask prospects who do *not* engage you what sent them to your competition. (They may try to take the easy out by saying price was the determining factor. Chances are, there's more to it than that most times.)

Remember, you have to ask the right questions to get the answers that are relevant. But if you keep the blinders on, you won't even see the need to ask questions. You won't be able to take a look at things from an outside perspective. As my grandmother used to say, no matter how good you are, you can always be better. She was very wise.

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