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Understanding Client Needs and Closing the Deal: The Competitive Edge for Modern Lawyers

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Success in the legal field now requires more than just technical expertise, given the growing commoditization of services and changing client expectations. Today, the lawyers who thrive are those combining legal acumen with emotional intelligence, client-centered communication, and the ability to turn consultations into committed engagements.

Understanding what clients *really* want - and knowing how to guide them from initial contact to signed retainer - is a skill that distinguishes rainmakers from the rest. Here's how lawyers can strategically approach client conversations, foster trust, and close the deal without sounding like a salesperson.

1. Listen First—And Keep Listening

Initial consultations are often emotionally charged. Clients may feel overwhelmed, uncertain, or even embarrassed. This is your moment to lead, not with solutions, but with empathy.

Start by asking open-ended questions:

- “Can you walk me through what brought you in today?”
- “What’s your biggest concern right now?”

Then pause. Let silence work for you. It’s often in these quiet spaces that clients share their most important worries. Beyond facts, listen for:

- Emotional drivers (fear, urgency, guilt, or anger)
- Unspoken expectations or past disappointments
- Hints at their ideal outcome, even if it’s unrealistic

Active listening not only helps you assess the case but also establishes the kind of rapport that leads to trust, referrals, and long-term loyalty.

2. Clarify, Confirm, and Contextualize

Once the client has shared their story, don't immediately dive into legal analysis. Instead, ask clarifying questions to demonstrate you understand their situation and to show you are thinking critically about it.

Examples include:

- “Just to make sure I understand, are you hoping for a resolution before the end of the year?”
- “Have you already spoken with another attorney about this issue?”
- “Would you say this has affected your business operations, or is it more of a personal matter?”

This approach positions you as a strategic partner, not just a service provider.

3. Drop the Legalese - Speak the Client's Language

Lawyers spend years learning to speak the language of the law. But clients are buying solutions, not statutes. When discussing your strategy, use plain language and focus on outcomes.

Instead of: *“We'll file a demurrer on the grounds that the complaint fails to state a cause of action.”*
Say: *“Our first step will be to ask the court to dismiss the case, arguing that it doesn't have enough legal basis to move forward.”*

This shift in communication style demonstrates clarity, confidence, and respect for the client's perspective.

4. Demonstrate Relevance, Not Just Résumé

Your credentials matter - but only if they are clearly tied to the client's problem. Instead of reciting your background, show them how your specific experience benefits *them*.

Share brief, anonymized success stories that resonate:

- “I recently helped a small business owner in a similar contract dispute resolve it through mediation in under 60 days.”
- “We've represented multiple professionals in your industry facing similar licensing challenges.”

This method builds credibility without sounding self-promotional.

5. Simplify the Path to Engagement

Many lawyers lose prospective clients not because of price, but because of complexity. A confusing or delayed intake process is a surefire way to create doubt.

Ensure your intake system includes:

- A clear scope of work or proposal
- A user-friendly engagement agreement
- Transparent fee arrangements, including payment plans if appropriate

Clients should feel empowered and reassured - not burdened - by the onboarding process.

6. Master the Art of the Follow-Up

It's common for clients to delay a decision, especially if they're comparing firms or consulting family members. That's why follow-up communication is key.

Send a brief, personalized message within 48 hours:

- Thank them for their time
- Reiterate your understanding of their needs
- Offer to answer any questions
- Outline the next step, should they choose to proceed

This simple act shows professionalism and care—and often tips the scale in your favor.

Final Thought: Your Client Experience Is Your Competitive Advantage

In the legal profession, trust is currency. The most successful lawyers are those who position themselves not just as legal experts, but as reliable allies who understand the emotional, practical, and financial realities their clients face.

By investing in better communication, empathy, and client-centric engagement strategies, lawyers can distinguish themselves in a crowded field—and close more deals with confidence and integrity.

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