Why partners don't like client feedback

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Sue-Ella Prodonovich highlights one of the barriers to a successful client feedback programme – and how to overcome it.

Client feedback is one of the most wonderful business development tools any professional services firm has at its disposal. Done properly, it can inform your growth strategy, help you hone your BD efforts and, ultimately, lead to a more successful practice. And yet, all too often the people who don't want to do client feedback are the very ones you'd think would benefit most from it – the fee earners themselves.

But that really shouldn't surprise you. I see many programmes stall with the excuse that their partners are afraid to get feedback.

The reason they don't like client feedback isn't only because they don't want their egos shattered or confidence crushed, but because of how the information has been used.

I've seen firms cross the line and hand bad client feedback to HR so that staff become scared stiff about their bonuses and even their future at the firm. I've seen firms get the wrong information from it, draw the wrong conclusions and then set a strategy that makes them head down the wrong path, leaving their staff much worse off. And I've seen firms tie themselves in knots trying to please unpleasable clients.

With that in mind, here are the seven reasons your fee earners don't want to do client feedback and what you need to do to convince them to get onboard.

1 Use client feedback as a weapon

The number one reason your colleagues don't want to do client feedback is that they're worried about negative feedback. Or, more accurately, they're worried about what you'll do with any negative feedback.

But here's the thing, negative feedback isn't necessarily an issue at all. Using it to punish professionals based on the opinion of one client is as far removed from the point of implementing a client feedback programme as you can get.

To overcome this feedback hesitancy, you need to let people know upfront why

you're doing client feedback and how the information will be used. Will it land on HR's desk or will it stay with the partner only – or somewhere in-between?

If need be, send a formal email spelling out exactly how any information will be used and commit yourself to never using it against them.

2 You ask the wrong clients

Some clients will be unhappy with you because you simply won't be able to give them what they want. They may have unrealistic expectations or be dodgy people who want to do dodgy things. Some clients will be unhappy with you because of the work you do or because they resent the rules of compliance.

So why then, do most firms punish themselves and ask disgruntled clients what they think of their services? Why do they care? These are the wrong clients to speak to because their testimony is likely to be unreliable and unrepresentative of how most people perceive you. So ignore them. Ask the clients you have a good relationship with first.

3 You focus on what you do wrong

At its best, client feedback should be used to focus on what you're doing right more than what you're doing wrong. Why is it that some clients love your work and want to engage you as much as they can?

These are the clients you want to work with. So finding out how you can get more like them is more important to your BD efforts than finding out why someone you don't want to work with doesn't want to work with you either.

Discovering what people think you do well and then replicating it is the whole foundation of business development, and good client feedback can be the engine room that drives that. Your fee earners will gain confidence from knowing what people see as their strengths rather than their weaknesses.

4 You ask the wrong people

Whenever you ask a client for feedback you're giving them power over you. They get to say what you're doing well and what you're not. In doing so, they can often feel as though they have sway over you for the very first time. In most instances, that probably won't be an issue. But in others it will be.

You may be asking someone with an axe to grind or someone who didn't want to engage you in first place.

> ***Client feedback should be a commitment to listen, not a commitment to act.***

You may be asking someone who is a bad cultural fit for the firm – the kind who only likes doing business with a particular type of person and the adviser you put on their file for one matter wasn't that kind. Worst of all, you may be asking someone who really has no buying authority.

The key isn't just to get the right client, it's to get the right person within that client's organisation. Otherwise, you're wasting your time and that of your fee earners.

5 You treat them (and their clients) like idiots

For me, this is a big one. I hate nothing more than when smart people get treated like they're dumb. And that's exactly what happens in a lot of client feedback I see.

Most successful fee earners already get feedback and have done so for years. They are tapped into their networks, they have their ear to the ground, they are sensitive to subtle changes in client temperatures, and they have well-timed conversations. This helps maintain power in their relationships. So just because they don't engage in your formal programme doesn't mean they're not on board with feedback.

The second part is the approach. A lawyer, accountant or consultant's work is highly skilled, nuanced and personal. And yet, most firms ask for client feedback like they're asking someone to rate a hire car service.

So when you're putting together your client feedback programme, use your brain. Don't send out a 50-question survey to as many people as you can. And don't try to book in 50 client feedback calls a week. Quality is better than quantity. Take your time, be flexible with approaches and ask insightful questions.

In other words, give your fee earners meaningful feedback if you want them on your side, not some arbitrary and superficial review system to tick an activity box.

6 You want to please everyone

People put a lot of store in client satisfaction rather than client feedback. So much so that getting a good score, rather than gathering quality insights, becomes the end goal.

As marketers, I think we're conditioned to try to please people. So when someone tells us we're doing something wrong, we go out of our way to try and fix it, just so we can feel good about being liked.

But here's the thing. You don't necessarily need or want a great client satisfaction score. If you do, it often means you're a 'people pleaser' not a professional. You don't want to be perceived as always being nice. You want to be perceived as competent and committed to earn their respect.

7 You promise to act on it

Finally, I think the biggest mistake firms make with client feedback is when they make over-promises to clients about what they intend to do with the information. Client feedback should be a commitment to listen, not a commitment to act. Firms get themselves into all kinds of trouble when they don't make this clear, and find that they have to switch staff or operate differently just to appease one client.

Say, for instance, your client doesn't like working with a senior associate but you know that they're the best or only one you've got. What are you going to do? Compromise the quality of your advice? Look for another employee?

So be upfront with your clients and tell them the purpose and limits of client feedback. You'll get a lot more buy-in from your own fee earners if you do.

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