

## Lessons learned working at an Iowa men's clothing store

by Michael Pill

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I very much appreciated the Jan. 16 Coach's Corner column entitled "[The most important legal ranking – the client's.](#)"

I gave up on Martindale-Hubbell many years ago when a salesman tried to persuade me by phone to purchase a large, expensive advertisement in that publication. I responded that I had only a BV rating, and his answer was: "We can take care of that for you." So much for the integrity of Martindale-Hubbell rankings.

When I called to complain about such sales tactics, I was brushed off.

Growing up working in my immigrant grandfather's men's clothing store in Iowa, I learned firsthand how the old, independent merchants in those pre-chain-store and pre-shopping-mall days

built up and kept their clientele.

One day while I was straightening stock in the store, an old farmer came in to buy his 50th anniversary suit from my grandfather. While they were talking about old times, I learned the farmer had bought his wedding suit from our store 50 years earlier and had been a regular customer ever since. After he bought the suit, the farmer invited my grandparents to his golden anniversary celebration.

My grandfather's core maxim was "We want you to be a satisfied customer." Sometimes that meant doing alterations for free and taking back an item that did not fit right even though it had been washed and therefore could not be resold as new. He never hesitated to open up the store on a Sunday if a customer needed something, or to stay after closing time to make sure a new suit would fit properly.

Over the years I have come to think of several regular commercial clients as friends, the same way my grandfather felt about his customers. One client, who runs one of the nation's last independent family-owned department stores, told me that the relative who preceded him in the business taught him that "you should treat a customer like you would treat a guest in your home."

If a client calls or sends an email when I am in the midst of dealing with a deadline or crisis in another case, I respond with a very short email stating: "I received your email. Right now I am racing to meet a deadline in another case. I will respond substantively as soon as I can." Most people are very understanding, so long as they know communications to their lawyer are not being ignored.

In my law practice, one key to success has been never charging for phone calls with clients. Does that cost me a lot of billable time? Of course. But it means that if my clients have a question, problem or complaint, they do not hesitate to call me. No client of mine has ever suffered what I consider to be an ultimate insult: "I called the !@#&\*! lawyer to complain and he billed me for the phone call!"

I also do not charge for many brief email communications of the sort that used to be handled

by phone. That also costs a substantial amount of billable time, but as with free phone calls, it demonstrates to my clients that they are not being "nickel and dimed." Recently I was stunned to see another lawyer's invoice with a 0.1 hour entry for leaving a telephone voice-mail message.

Yes, I have had two or three clients over the years who abused the free phone calls. I finished the cases for which I was hired and politely declined to work for them again.

If a prospective client calls me and I can help solve his problem with a 30- to 60-minute phone call, I do it. If I know of another lawyer, even one who is outside my law firm, who I honestly believe is the best attorney for that client's case, I make the referral. I do not accept or pay referral fees.

I believe the approach described above represents the best investment in marketing and reputation-building that any lawyer can make.

At the age of 65 I still work hard, including weekends, holidays and early mornings. My clients know they can call or email me early mornings and weekends.

I try very hard to make sure my clients know that even if we lose a case, I did everything possible that could be done to advance that client's cause in a reasonably polite, professional, ethical manner. I follow the three basic rules I was taught many years ago: (1) preparation; (2) preparation; (3) more preparation.

The old-time independent retail merchants succeeded by providing top-quality customer service and a good product at reasonable cost. I have always tried to do the same. I make detailed entries on my invoices so clients know what is done with their money. Charging hundreds or even thousands of dollars for "review of documents" without further explanation does not inspire confidence in a lawyer's integrity.

One concrete benefit of decades of practicing law along the lines described above is that nowadays the phone rings. For years I have depended entirely on word-of-mouth referrals, sometimes from adverse parties in prior cases.

To the extent that attorneys in large law firms find their billing systems, or the demands being made upon them for billable hours, do not allow them to take the approach described above, all I can say is I am glad. That means there will always be a place in this profession for smaller law firms not burdened with the high overhead that afflicts large law firms, forcing partners and associates to maximize billable hours today without regard for the old but sound business principles of yesterday.

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