

# LOCKDOWN

## Lessons from lockdown: strong relationships are key

Mark Rowlands, CEO Lamb Chambers, shares some insights on best practice for 'virtual' client communications

### IN BRIEF

- ▶ Outlines marketing and client relationship lessons learned during the pandemic.
- ▶ Avoid adding to screen overload by making sure communications add value.
- ▶ Ensure legal service and client care remain a top priority.

Establishing and cementing personal relationships is a major part of creating business partnerships, particularly in service industries like law. A strong business relationship is centred around many different aspects, such as specialist knowledge, service quality, value for money, adaptability, transparency, reliability and trust. When we suddenly went into lockdown in March last year due to COVID-19, the inability to meet clients face-to-face and create personal connections had a big impact on client relationships.

### Virtual/remote interaction

During lockdown we were all thrust into the virtual space: for the first time entertaining clients via video conferencing facilities. Virtual client events such as quiz nights, beer/wine/cheese tastings, yoga classes, book clubs, happy hours, networking parties, fireside chats etc, that started off as new and exciting all became commonplace. Over time, the novelty of video conferencing has taken its toll, and we have seen a major decline in attendance of these events, so called 'Zoom fatigue'. Many of our clients were receiving invitations for virtual events from various organisations on a daily basis, and it became more of a chore than a pleasure. This had a knock-on effect on business conversations, and we saw clients reverting back to using the telephone to communicate with their solicitors/barristers instead of video conference. (The lack of a decent haircut may have had something to do with that as well!)

Video conference facilities have provided a critical tool from a personal and business perspective during the past 12 months, and will continue to do so but in moderation.

For me, running a barristers' chambers, video conferencing was hugely effective for communicating with staff, members and the management board while everyone was working from home. In fact, I think our experience would have been very different without it. It was a vital tool for driving chambers forward during this pandemic rather than simply treading water.

Another aspect of the virtual nature of the current world we are living in is the longer working day. It is probably not what we originally envisaged last March. No lie-ins or knocking off early! Add into the mix child-care and home-schooling duties and I can see clients feeling the strain of the past 12 months. Building and maintaining strong relationships with clients is one of our major differentiators as a chambers, so I decided that I (and practice managers) would pick up the phone and call many of our clients over a period of months to connect on a personal level and to see how they were getting on. All relationships, whether personal or business, have an emotional component and as a chambers, we wanted to bring a bit of practical and emotional support to our clients stuck at home. We all become more connected when we are in it together. Our clients seemed to appreciate the personal calls, and from my point of view it was good to connect with clients in this way and share experiences.

### Digital interaction

Having been forced by the pandemic to look quickly for other ways to improve and maintain client relationships, the legal sector turned to digital marketing. Digital marketing is making sure your business has greater online visibility, whether it be through webinars, social media,

leveraging organic search engine results or podcasts. If we cannot interact with our clients personally then it is important that the information they receive from us is targeted, relevant, concise and clear. If clients receive irrelevant information, and on a constant basis, it can have a real negative effect on how they view the firm or chambers. Digital marketing should be used sparingly in order to survive the digital fatigue of this pandemic. Do not overload clients and only intervene with added value. The right tailored digital content made more human will assist your clients and strengthen client loyalty.

### So, what have I learned about client relationships?

The main lesson is that strong relationships are key to running a successful business. You may be the smartest lawyer but without a client following you have no business. To achieve a client following you need to spend time building and nurturing relationships.

Some other factors to consider are as follows:

- ▶ We need to be even more flexible and go the extra mile for clients;
- ▶ Nothing will ever replace physical interaction. I am looking forward to meeting up with them again as soon as everyone is comfortable doing so;
- ▶ We need to embrace technology to nurture relationships, but it does need to add value and be done in an effective manner;
- ▶ Technology may not always be the best way forward for those clients who do not embrace digital technology. Picking up the phone may be more appreciated; and
- ▶ Have staff (such as practice managers/trainee solicitors) play a more significant role in client relations whether their interaction is done remotely, digitally or in person.

For the rest of 2021, I suspect there will be progression towards normality but, in the meantime, I will be making sure that both legal service and client care remains my top priority. As Woody Allen once said, 'I think a relationship is like a shark. It has to constantly move forward or it dies.'

Mark Rowlands, CEO at Lamb Chambers.