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Strategic Partnerships between Law Firms and Clients: The New Rules of Collaboration

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Many Law Firm/Client relationships are complicated, but the relationships built on open communication and a willingness to collaborate are the ones that last. In *The Full-Service Client Partnership: Examining Strategic Alliances through Technology & Business Operations* panel at the [Thomson Reuters Marketing Partner Forum](#), industry leaders will discuss what good collaboration looks like, and how law firms can add value to help ensure a long, healthy relationship.

Many clients are interested in developing a relationship built on collaboration--so the law firm they work with is a partner, not simply a service provider. Law firms must be able to completely understand a client's business and concerns in order to position the firm to meet the needs of the client; effectively answering questions that haven't been asked and solving problems that haven't yet come up.

To develop a relationship based on teamwork, law firms need to demonstrate to clients that they can work

together. Rodger R. Cole^[1] of Fenwick & West says, "Our clients tell us that seeing how the law firm collaborates internally is a strong indicator of how well it will collaborate with its clients." One way to demonstrate the ability to collaborate within the firm is to discuss the resources available to the client--budgeting, billing and IT contacts--in order to demonstrate the full force of the team at the firm who will be working on the matter and, as Cole says, "hopefully exceeding client expectations."

Communication is a vital factor in this relationship. The panelists agree that a frank conversation of goals and expectations is the first step to a successful and lasting relationship. Elizabeth Green^[2] of Baker & Hostetler says, "we begin any matter with a discussion and mutual agreement between the client and client service team on goals and objectives." Cole elaborates, saying, "It's also important for us to spend time up front asking clients about their preferences and expectations--both their goals for a specific matter as well as general expectations around communication, reporting, document sharing, billing and budgeting--and then communicating those to the client team at the law firm so everybody is clear." Ama Romaine, General Counsel at Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Lab, agrees, saying, "open communication and flexibility are the primary indicators of a firm's willingness and ability to collaborate."

This can mean challenging assumptions and discussing uncomfortable issues. Talking about the nitty-gritty and hashing out details of the relationship can remove issues that might show up later, and sets the stage for an effective working relationship. Michael Caplan,^[3] *Chief Operating Officer*, Goodwin Procter LLP, adds, "Collaboration with a client must include a discussion on shared risk, especially with a new client. Working with clients in a transparent manner on staffing, leverage, pricing, project management, key assumptions and having 'skin in the game' is what drives new work with a new client opportunity. It's ok to call out the elephants in the room with your client regarding price, rates, AFAs, etc. THAT is collaboration."



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Additionally, this is a conversation that must continue as the relationship goes on. Cole says, “Not enough law firms take the time to sit down with the clients and focus exclusively on service delivery: what are we doing well that we should do more of? Where are your expectations not being met? In what areas do you need more help/where are you not getting the support you need?” Taking the time while the matter is ongoing to solicit feedback and make adjustments can make a big difference. Course correction midway can be difficult, but being responsive to the client’s needs almost always pays off. Romaine agrees, saying, “Flexibility is also important as clients’ needs change constantly. Corporations are not static, and legal departments function under the same pressures as the rest of their business operates under. Thus law firms should be attuned to client concerns and be willing to flex their billing practices to demonstrate that their relationship is a partnership and not that of a service provider.”

The conclusion of a matter is also an important time to check in with clients and ask for feedback. Green says, “At the conclusion of a matter we work through an assessment of the engagement to gauge our client’s satisfaction with the outcomes and, importantly, identify opportunities to improve the collaborative legal process in subsequent matters.”

Open communication and a willingness to work through issues of service delivery and billing are important ways law firms can demonstrate their interest in effectively collaborating with clients. In many ways this is new territory for law firms, but a willingness to learn, listen, and work with clients will certainly pay off for law firms who take that chance.

More about collaboration, and other ways law firms and clients interact will be discussed at *The Full-Service Client Partnership: Examining Strategic Alliances through Technology & Business Operations*, a panel at the [Thomson Reuters Marketing Partners Forum](#).

^[1] [Rodger R. Cole](#), Partner and Chair Litigation at Fenwick & West law Firm.

^[2] [Elizabeth Green](#), Partner and Leader, Bankruptcy, Restructuring and Creditors Rights Practice, Baker.

^[3] [Michael Caplan](#), Chief Operating Officer, Goodwin Procter LLP.

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