

Want to Build a Law Firm of the Future? Ask Yourself These 8 Questions

Succeeding in today's legal marketplace requires innovation and a focus on client value.

By Michael Caplan
October 20, 2020

Competition. Disruption. Pandemic. As cliché as it sounds, today more than ever, law firms must differentiate to thrive. Look no further than any day's headlines and you will see that the pressures on law firms are immense. At Goodwin, we have been thinking differently about what it takes to succeed. Here are eight experience-based questions about the business of law that you should be asking yourself. Spoiler alert: It is all about client value.

What else have you got? Excellence in the practice of law is table stakes. Clients expect it and lawyers focus relentlessly on it. So what else do

you have to give? Five years ago, we began to offer our firm's operational (i.e. non-legal) expertise to clients, free of charge. This started with consulting on technology assessment, pricing and knowledge management and grew to include diversity, equity and inclusion;



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pro bono; project management; marketing and communications; and, more recently, business continuity and reimagining real estate. Consulting on the business of law is where you can add immediate value to your clients.



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How do you pitch? Once you introduce your clients to operational consulting, re-think your pitch. Clients routinely ask for our business of law expertise, and our partners now insist that our operations team be part of client meetings. In fact, these meetings often focus first on how we can help on the business side, and the legal discussion follows. It is a powerful dynamic.

Do you still call your nonlawyers “administrative staff”? We do not. All nonlawyers at Goodwin—from secretaries to chief officers—are part of what we call a global operations team. The name itself casts nonlawyers' role at a law firm in a different hue. We are not providing just traditional,

internal administrative support anymore. We understand our clients' business and products, and we are tied to their revenue, profits, risk and investments. We have a stake in building our client relationships. By thinking differently about nonlawyers at your firm, you can do the same.

Are you educating your operations team? You want your nonlawyers to fully understand your business strategy and your client service model, and you should be doing everything you can to shore up your internal education efforts. If you do this right, everyone will be marching to the same beat and will collaborate more effectively to achieve clients' goals.

What are you clients telling you? Time and time again, clients tell us that they recognize the benefits accruing from this service model. They understand that experience in the business of law can benefit their operations. When teams on both sides come together to solve a client's problems, great things can happen—more touch points, improved service delivery, and an overall stronger relationship. Ask your clients for feedback on how you are supporting them operationally. Do it frequently.

How is your culture? Combining the business and practice of law in a client service model is not easy. Law firms can be resistant to change, silos can be difficult to break down, and even clients can be skeptical at first. Having a firm culture where people are willing to embrace change is critical. Work hard at your culture, every day, to make sure it is well set up for embracing what nonlawyers can bring to the table.

What is your structure? This client service model only works well if your operations staff is properly structured. Hire folks who fully understand the

practice of law, but perhaps even more importantly, those who understand business of law and can serve your clients operationally. Within the past year or so, we have created brand new positions of a chief client development officer and a chief innovation officer, among others. Review your operations team structure and fine-tune it continuously to make sure it is optimized for what your clients need today and will need tomorrow.

Why are you innovating? You can hardly go a day without reading about law firm innovation. But what is the purpose of it all? Firms that focus on innovation first and foremost to serve their clients better are the ones that will differentiate themselves in the long run. Truly innovative firms connect and share expertise and knowledge with their clients; think about tools, data, processes and people differently for the sake of their clients; and seize opportunities around global disruption to help their clients succeed.

All successful law firms today have mastered the practice of law. Mastering the business of law and operational partnerships is the next frontier. Ultimately, bringing together the practice of law with the business of law is what will unlock true client value and, in the process, allow your firm to thrive. So, what will you do today to build the law firm of tomorrow?

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