

# MINDING YOUR CLIENT'S BUSINESS

*Becoming an indispensable resource:  
five tips on delivering for business clients*

*by Richard M. Brenner and James C. Chapman*

**B**eing an effective business lawyer means more than simply keeping clients out of legal jeopardy. In today's increasingly complex business environment, clients want a lot more from their lawyer. Clients want their lawyer to be more than simply someone they call to ask legal questions or to help with a contract from time to time. They want to work with a lawyer who understands their business issues as well as their legal ones—and who can provide broad-based, encompassing solutions.

In speaking with many business lawyers and clients alike, we've found that it really comes down to five key common sense tips that can make the difference between a client considering you as just "my lawyer" to being considered as an indispensable resource.

**1. Be business oriented.** This sounds basic, but you'd be surprised at how many clients feel their lawyers don't have a clear understanding of their business and the business issues they confront. Typically lawyers solve legal problems. However, clients are looking for lawyers who use the law to solve business problems or to capture business opportunities.

**2. Understand that legal issues are only a small part of a transaction.** In any transaction, the overall business objective is paramount. The attorney must never lose sight of the fact that the reason for the transaction is to satisfy a business objective. Preferably, this objective should be achieved in a win-win manner for both sides. Business lawyers frequently get lost in the minutia; examples abound in real estate transactions or mergers and acquisitions of lawyers off chasing tangents far removed from the business objectives. As a result, instead of being viewed as a catalyst, lawyers tend to be seen as roadblocks to progress. If you stay focused on the big picture by fully understanding the business purpose of the transaction, you'll be able to provide solutions aimed at achieving the business purpose—and you will become more valuable to your client.

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**3. Respond quickly.** In today's fast-paced environment speed is extremely important. Time is the enemy of every deal. When lawyers cause delays by failing to respond quickly, deals tend to fall apart. They become subject to intervening events such as the loss of a customer, a new law, or economic news. Sometimes attorneys in smaller firms can react more quickly because they're not constrained by bureaucracies and other obstacles typically found within larger firms.

**4. Be professional.** This sounds trite, but remember that your client doesn't want to hear your comment about how tired you are because it took you all night to finish a project. Nor does your client want to hear how the demands of other clients have caused you to deliver projects late. The client just wants the project to get done. Similarly, most negotiations have an emotional element. It is the lawyer's job to remain above the tense emotions that often characterize negotiations. All too often, unfortunately, it's the lawyer who gets carried away and loses objectivity.

**5. Offer solutions.** Many lawyers are good at identifying every risk involved in a transaction. Unfortunately, they are often less skilled in providing solutions to eliminate those risks. This approach just heightens the client's anxiety. It's not enough to simply identify problems; you're being paid to solve them.

By keeping these five tips in mind, you'll undoubtedly become a more effective business lawyer and a more valuable part of your client's team of trusted advisers.

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