

# Client Surveys Can Demonstrate Your Law Department's Value

By Marci M. Krufka

**A**s corporations throughout the United States continue to pay careful attention to controlling costs, law departments remain under scrutiny. Accordingly, in-house lawyers regularly look for ways to demonstrate value to their clients. One of the easiest and most cost effective ways of doing this is to seek regular feedback from clients.

Some companies require support functions, such as law, to conduct annual satisfaction surveys, often in connection with performance evaluations of law department lawyers and staff. In many companies, however, law departments rarely, if ever, seek feedback from their clients about whether they are meeting client needs.

Lawyer personality data reveal that their aversion to feedback may not be due to a lack of concern for clients, but rather to unique characteristics in the lawyer personality. Most lawyers have particularly low resilience – the quality that determines how well one responds to criticism and rejection. Therefore, it is not surprising that asking for feedback is particularly difficult for lawyers.

If your lawyers can overcome this barrier, they will find that merely asking clients for their opinions and feedback typically creates an enhanced image of the law department and an improved relationship between the department and its clients. This phenomenon seems to endure for several months to a year following the survey. Conducting satisfaction surveys seems to create a halo effect for the surveyor.

A 2002 study conducted by Paul M. Dholakia of Rice University's Jesse H. Jones Graduate School of Management, and Vicki G. Morwitz of New York University's Stern School of Business, supports the halo effect theory and concludes that merely conducting satisfaction surveys *enhances client loyalty and profitability.*<sup>1</sup>

It is more likely than not that you will receive overwhelmingly positive results from your clients in response to a satisfaction survey. The truth, however, is that there may be some

clients who are not completely satisfied with your services. Still, if you are really trying to demonstrate the value your department provides to clients, is it not better to know that areas for improvement exist so that you can address them?

If yours is a law department that does seek formal client feedback on a regular basis – congratulations. But what do you do with the feedback you receive? Too often we hear from law department clients that when they have provided feedback to their lawyers, little, if anything, has been done in response.

If your department is serious about improving the quality of services you provide to your clients and wants to demonstrate the value as well, it should do the following:

- Conduct regular client satisfaction surveys.
- In the surveys, be sure to ask clients about:
  - the overall level of satisfaction
  - satisfaction with particular services provided by the department
  - responsiveness
  - your understanding of their business
  - the role of the lawyers in the business
  - costs and budgeting
  - satisfaction with outside counsel
  - legal needs for the foreseeable future
- Provide space for narrative comments so that clients can provide detailed feedback if they choose to do so.
- Ask your clients to waive the confidentiality of their responses, so that you may more adequately address their needs.
- Offer clients the opportunity to respond to the survey online. The easier and more convenient your survey, the higher your response rate will be.
- Resist the urge to ask too many questions. Your clients are very busy and will be appreciative if you ask fewer questions.

*continued on page 11*



Marcia M. Krufka

---

**“... merely  
conducting  
satisfaction  
surveys  
enhances  
client  
loyalty and  
profitability.”**

---

**Client Surveys ...** *continued from page 5*

- Have your lawyers and paralegals respond to the same survey you send to your clients. Use the tabulated results to conduct a gap analysis between how your clients rate you and how you think clients rate you.
- Ask department members as well as clients to rate the performance of key outside counsel. Discuss the results with these firms and follow up to ensure that any issues are addressed.
- Benchmark your clients' responses versus the responses of law department clients in other companies. Reviewing your client survey results in a vacuum may be interesting, but it probably will not result in the improvements in client service that you seek. For example, if your clients' rate your department's level of responsiveness a four on a scale of one-to-five, should you be pleased or concerned?
- Respond promptly and directly to the client regarding any problem cited, tell them how you plan to correct it, and do so immediately.

- Include client survey follow-up as an agenda item in your department or practice section meetings until all issues have been addressed.

---

***“Have your lawyers  
and paralegals respond to  
the same survey you  
send to your clients.”***

---

- Make client service and client feedback follow-up efforts a real factor in compensation decisions. If your department is serious about making client service a priority, it will reward those who take it seriously.
- If you utilize a third party to conduct and tabulate the survey, make sure that they have experience in conducting client satisfaction sur-

veys for law departments, that they understand the legal market and the unique issues involved in the delivery of legal services, that they can conduct the survey online and that they can benchmark your results versus those of other law department clients to the same questions.

- Do not make your client survey a one-time event. Conduct surveys annually so that you can track your department's improvement and continue to ensure the highest level of client service.
- Continually assessing and improving the level of service your law department provides will allow it to demonstrate its value to the company and meet the increasingly high demands of clients of support functions in corporations today. ♦

<sup>1</sup> The study, reported in the *Journal of Consumer Research* in September 2002, was highlighted in the May 2002 *Harvard Business Review*.

**Marci M. Krufka** is a senior consultant with Altman Weil, Inc, in Newtown Square, Pennsylvania. Contact Ms. Krufka at (610) 886-2000 or [mmkrufka@altmanweil.com](mailto:mmkrufka@altmanweil.com)