As in-house counsel, you have one client: your company. Thus, it is essential that you build and maintain an excellent rapport with that client. Through our interactions with corporate (and other) clients, we have found that, far and away, the best way to build and preserve a solid client rapport is effective communication. Additionally, although all clients are unique, we have observed several universal keys to effectively communicating with corporate clients. These keys will help you to successfully communicate with your client-company and, in turn, build the rapport necessary for a mutually beneficial relationship.

**Keys to Effectively Communicating at the Start of a Matter.**

Effectively communicating with your client is always important, but it is especially vital when the client approaches you about a particular legal issue or concern for the first time. During these initial meetings, the key to effectively communicating is to first determine the client’s precise goals and then explain to the client the various options for achieving these ends.

**Determine The Ends Before Talking Means.** When your client first comes to you with a legal issue or concern, start by letting him or her do the talking. Begin these meetings by letting the client explain what he or she hopes to accomplish through the representation. As the client explains these goals, listen actively, interrupting only when you need clarification. Don’t start talking about possible options or solutions until the client has thoroughly explained his or her goals and you are confident that you understand those ends.

**Give The Bottom Line On Every Option.** After you have determined your client’s goals, it is time to explain the options for achieving them. This means discussing the pros and cons of every option, from alternative dispute resolution to litigation to no immediate action at all. Remember, however, that clients in general—and corporate clients specifically—don’t want a legal treatise on every option; they want the bottom line up front. Thus, when explaining the pros and cons of each option, be clear and concise. Yet, you shouldn’t be so concise as to simply endorse one option over the others. After all, the choice of what legal option to pursue is the client’s, not yours.

Once you and your client decide upon a particular course of action, make sure to confirm it in writing. This will ensure that you and your client are on the same page concerning your next steps.

**Keys to Effectively Communicating During The Course Of A Matter.**

Effectively communicating with your client is equally important during the course of a matter. During any given matter, the keys to effective communication are: promptly responding to client communications, taking the initiative to communicate to your client and managing client expectations.

**Return Client Communications Promptly.** By far, the most important step you can take to effectively communicate with your client about a given matter is to promptly return client phone calls and emails. Ignoring your client is a surefire way to destroy rapport. Even if the client’s question or concern doesn’t seem pressing, you

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need to respond quickly, because the client likely considers their concern or query quite urgent. Thus, every day you must set aside a block of time to return client communications. The golden rule is that you should answer all client communications within 24 hours.

**Take The Initiative To Communicate To Your Client.** Effectively communicating with your client requires that you do more than simply respond to their queries; you also need to take initiative in communicating with your client. You should regularly update your client, in writing, as to where a given matter stands and what you have recently done to move things along. If an important pleading or motion has recently been filed, send a copy to the client with a cover letter explaining its meaning. In these written updates, use clear and simple language. Avoid legalese. Don’t assume that because your client is sophisticated, he or she is fluent in legal jargon.

On a related note, you must take the initiative to regularly alert your client of his or her current options. For instance, if a case is about to go to trial, make sure to explain to your client the pros and cons of settling. Similarly, if your client loses a case, make sure to promptly talk to the client about the option of appealing.

**Manage Your Client’s Expectations.** Another key to effectively communicating with your client is to manage the client’s expectations. It’s good to let the client know when you will finish a given task, but you should always set due dates that are easily attainable. If you plan to have a motion filed by the first of the month, tell the client that you will file it by the fifth. This technique allows you to always meet, and often exceed, your client’s expectations.

Every client is different, and part of your job is determining the communication style to which your client best responds. All clients expect some very basic communication courtesies, such as active listening, clear communication of pros and cons, prompt responses and regular status updates. If you give your clients these courtesies, you will be well on your way to being an effective client communicator.

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