

MAKING YOUR CUSTOMERS HAPPY



white paper
2021 / 22



OUR SURVEY

SAYS THAT

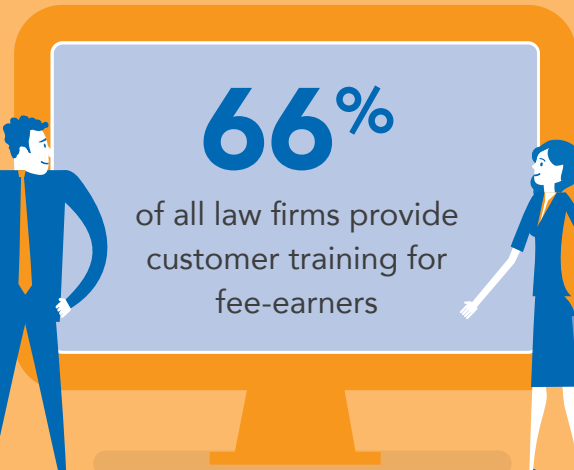
61%

of PI firms make
a priority of
agreeing costs
from the outset



86%

of law firms interviewed
require fee-earners
to adhere to service
standards

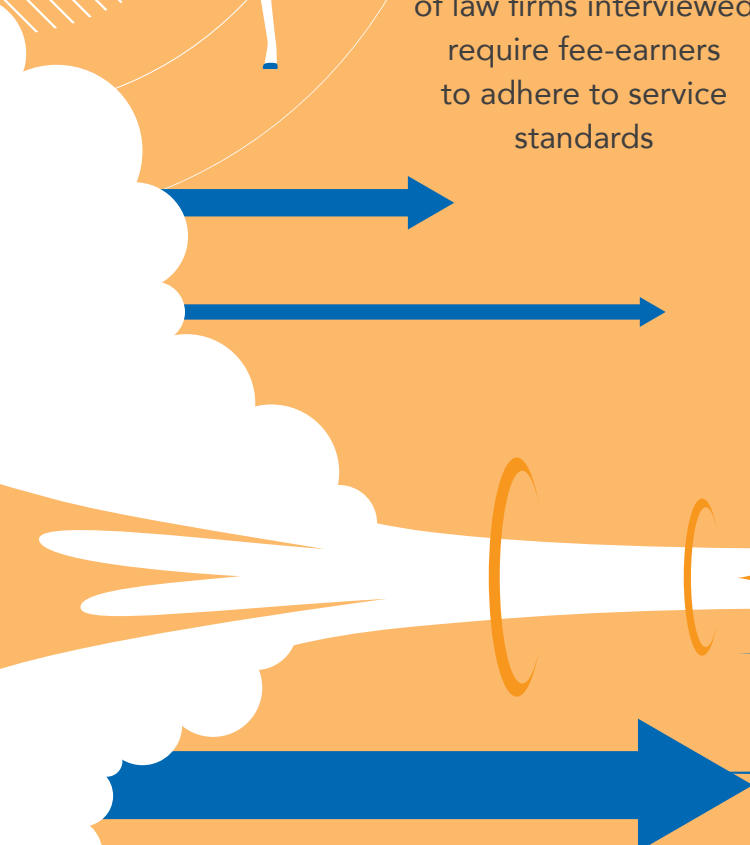


66%

of all law firms provide
customer training for
fee-earners

82%

of all firms have service
standards for speed



56%

of all law firms say they understand the customer journey and have mapped out all their interactions with the customer

**34%**

say they are more focused on getting work in and matters completed than on the customer journey

**HALF**

of all law firms take down contact details in a consistent manner

**41%**

of all firms believe that giving good customer service is just as important as satisfactorily resolving a customer's legal matter





WELCOME

There was a time when simply having a brass nameplate outside of a solicitor's office was considered extravagant self-promotion.

Many readers may yearn for those days, when they just had to concentrate on their legal work, but customer service and maintaining your online reputation are now vital elements of modern legal practice.

This links closely to the transparency agenda pushed by the Competition and Markets Authority and Legal Services Board, and this year's white paper takes stock of the progress that law firms have made in developing consumer-friendly cultures.

One of the key messages is that it is no longer enough just to do the work – 41% of the firms surveyed for this white paper consider that customer service is just as important as resolving a legal matter satisfactorily.

That is huge progress in a few years and the figure will only keep going up. Clients may not be able to judge how good

a lawyer you are but they do know good or bad service when they receive it, and are not afraid to tell the world about it. As you will read, there are positive signs that more and more solicitors appreciate the need to understand the customer experience their firms provide and the virtuous circle of positive reviews and new clients that can follow.

Online reviews are particularly contentious for many in the profession but I don't think they can be ignored. Most of us use online reviews to judge a product or service nowadays and so why should law firms be exempt?

I hope you find that this white paper encourages you to review how your firm handles clients and we at First4Lawyers would be very happy to continue the discussion.

Qamar Anwar,
managing director, First4Lawyers

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“ There is yet another new reality coming to the legal services market – transparency. Solicitors will no longer be able to hide behind the difficulty and mystique of the law because regulators will not allow it. Change is coming, and it’s coming soon. ”

That was the introduction to our 2016 report ‘For whom the bell tolls – The customer service imperative’. Five years on, we are now firmly in the middle of that change.

Measures to impose price and service transparency requirements in certain areas of consumer and business law have been in place since December 2018, with further rules coming into force in November 2019. The legal regulators are now figuring out how to develop indicators of quality as well to help people choose a lawyer.

They are also working with review and comparison websites (known in official-speak as digital comparison tools, or DCTs) to make them work better in the legal market. The case of Summerfield Browne, the law firm that in January successfully sued a former client over a libellous review – but then received a great deal of negative comment online for doing so – has focused attention on this increasingly important aspect of law firm marketing.

So we have decided to return to the topics we covered five years ago to test how much has changed, commissioning a survey from IRN Research into the approach of both specialist personal injury and general consumer law firms to customer service in the 2020s.

But perhaps the greatest change is simply the fact that the need to sharpen up the way law firms interact with would-be and actual clients is now accepted, however reluctantly by some, as fact. Paternalistic ‘we know best’ presumptions,

push back against the feasibility of publishing ‘average’ prices, and contempt for the idea of clients reviewing their law firms are all disappearing, if at different rates.

Our white papers over the years have explored where law firms are falling down on customer service, whether at the moment a consumer realises they need to find a lawyer or the point where the work is done. Some firms do great work on this, while others recognise its importance and are on the journey. But there remains a significant number for whom there is a long way to go.

The myriad of shortcomings that have been identified by us and others have driven the imposition of the transparency requirements to improve customer service at the front-end and help people to shop around knowledgeably for a lawyer. This is where the two ends of the process increasingly link up – to bring in new work, you need to show prospective clients that you do a good job for your existing clients.

There are various ways in which this can be done, with online reviews the most high profile, and in the pages to come we will first look at the policy changes and research underpinning this irreversible trend, which by extension should also increase the level of differentiation and competition between lawyers.

THE DRIVING FORCE

The driving force now, as five years ago, is the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA). At the end of 2016, its review of the legal services market put transparency and helping consumers to shop around to the top of the regulatory priority list, finding there was not enough information available on price, quality and service to help those needing legal support to choose the best option for them.

Its progress report, published in December 2020, almost four years to the day later, kept up the pressure.

The regulatory requirements for price and service transparency have led to “a very substantial increase in the availability of such information”, the CMA found. Prices research jointly commissioned last year by the Legal Services Board (LSB), the CMA and Ministry of Justice revealed that the proportion of providers surveyed which displayed information on prices online increased from 11% in 2017 to 73% in 2020.

There was also “some evidence” that more consumers were able to locate the information and finding it useful, with Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) research last year indicating that 67% of recent users of solicitors looked at a provider’s website before engaging them.

Information on price, service and quality “is a necessary starting point for allowing consumers to make the sort of informed choices that drive competition”, the CMA said. “Therefore, we are encouraged by the marked improvement in the availability of price and service information since the market study.”

On the evidence, though, the watchdog said there has been a “limited impact” on the intensity of competition between providers and on outcomes. In particular, the research on pricing found no evidence yet of “a significant change in the level of price dispersion since the implementation of price and service transparency measures and there is limited evidence of increased shopping around”.

The CMA said it would expect the current measures to have greater impact over time, but the legal sector needed to go further to ensure they have the best chance of success. This included more action by regulators to ensure compliance with the rules and less flexibility in how lawyers provide the mandated information to consumers to make it easier to compare.

The CMA also highlighted the importance of progress on quality indicators to go alongside price information and the need to encourage the growth of DCTs in the legal market.



“Information on price, service and quality is a necessary starting point for allowing consumers to make the sort of informed choices that drive competition.”

CMA report

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RESEARCH, RESEARCH, RESEARCH

In an era of evidence-based policy making, the legal regulators have been careful to research the transparency reforms and performance levels among providers as they have gone along.

The prices research mentioned earlier, published in September 2020, showed significant regional variations in the price of legal advice “for what are fundamentally the same services”, and the LSB urged consumers to shop around more. It suggested that the impact of Covid-19 – with people accessing more services online – could make them more willing to use lawyers in other parts of the country where they did not need to meet face-to-face.

This was confirmed by a more recent survey of 1,200 consumers by IRN Research, which found that most who consulted a lawyer during the pandemic used the phone, while 28% used Zoom, Skype or a similar video tool. Nine out of 10 consumers were comfortable with the tools and ready to use them again; only a bare majority of consumers (51%) said they would like to see their lawyer face-to-face at some stage.

The LSB argued that better information on the quality of providers may help stimulate greater price competition; unexpectedly, factors such as publishing prices online, quality marks and providing services mainly remotely did not affect prices in any significant way.

IRN Research’s survey recorded that 59% of those polled would think about using a law firm or solicitor anywhere in the country, an increase from 46% in 2019, when IRN first asked the question. Researchers commented that while many consumers had traditionally turned to local firms, “things are changing”.

Making good choices

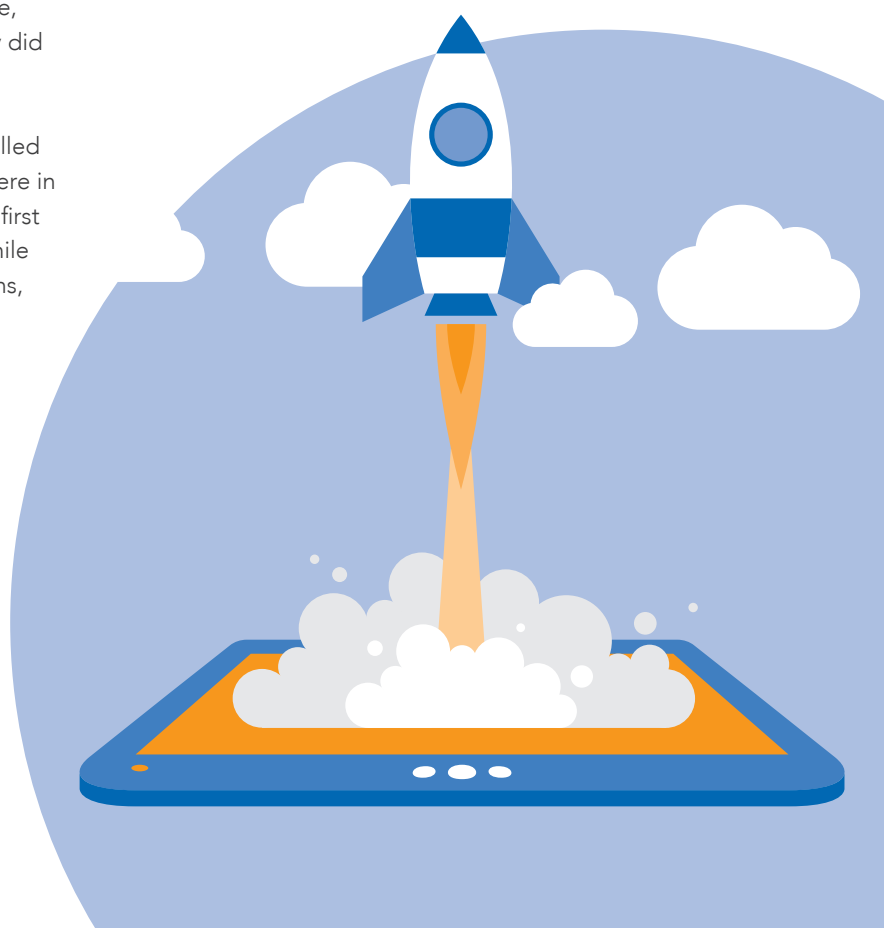
Of course, encouraging consumers to shop around means more focus on making law firms comparable. The SRA released its study in October 2020 as part of a five-year project to understand the impact of the transparency rules, and 77% of consumers and small businesses believed the information now being published had proven useful in helping them to make ‘good choices’.

Importantly, it appears that the reforms are debunking widespread misconceptions about the cost of legal services: just 10% of consumers

said that, after reviewing prices on law firm websites, they now thought instructing a solicitor was an unaffordable option; SRA research before the rules came in found that more than half of consumers assumed using a solicitor was unaffordable.

Potential clients used the information on price and service to choose which firms to contact for a conversation about their needs, before basing their final decision on who to instruct primarily on the usual factors such as reputation, experience and recommendations.

For an evaluation of just the first year of the new rules, the SRA was surely right to say the research gave a “promising” view of the direction of travel, but it will be some time before we fully understand the impact. “Our large-scale research has confirmed that there is a real public and small business appetite for better information about legal service providers.”



CHOOSING AND USING LAWYERS – THE LATEST FINDINGS

The Legal Services Consumer Panel has been conducting its tracker survey for a decade now and its longevity is useful in identifying key trends.

This year's showed how Covid has accelerated the shift to the online delivery of legal services, with consumers generally happy with the experience.

YouGov polled 3,500 consumers in February and March 2021 and found that 54% of those who had used a legal service since the start of the pandemic said it was delivered online, compared to 36% who used a legal service in the year before the pandemic, and 21% back in the first survey in 2012. Six in 10 consumers since the first lockdown said the experience was as they expected, but 26% said it was better, with only 10% saying it had been worse.

Those who used legal services during the pandemic were more likely to say that they shopped around than those who used legal services in the year before (35% v 27%) – but overall shopping around has only increased slowly over the past decade despite all the efforts to encourage it.

Immigration (49%) and conveyancing (38%) clients were most likely to shop around, with probate (19%) and accident or injury claims (16%) clients the least likely. Reputation (80%) continued to be front of mind when choosing a provider, followed by price (71%) and providers being specialists in their area (70%).

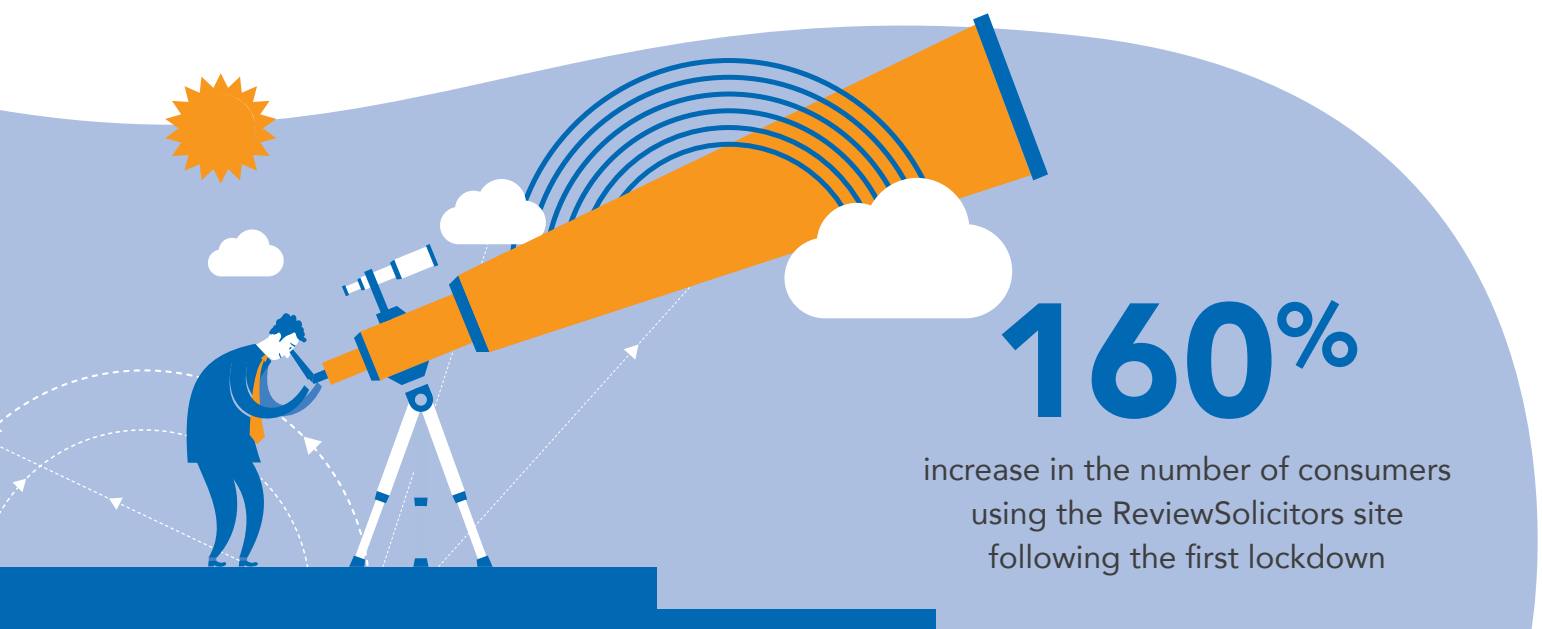
Positively, there has also been an increase in consumer satisfaction with the service received (from 79% in 2012 to 83% in 2021) and more consumers were very satisfied overall. Consumers who received their service face-to-face were more likely to be satisfied with the service provided (92%) than those who dealt with their lawyer online (79%).

Compare and contrast

There is no getting away from the growing importance of DCTs anymore, especially with 42% of respondents to the SRA research saying they would consider posting a review on a comparison website.

ReviewSolicitors reported a 160% increase in the number of consumers using the site following the first lockdown and a further 140% after the second, with about 2,000 firms now actively using the platform to collect reviews.

Some 800 legal services providers have registered with Trustpilot, with 25% more engaging with reviews since the start of the regulators' pilot we describe on the next page. Consumer reviews on Trustpilot about legal services have doubled.



Research into the consumer legal market published in May by transformation specialist Glenesk was based on 63 law firms in the top 225 that have a consumer presence. It found Trustpilot to be the dominant platform, with the number of reviews on these law firms having increased by 1,100% over the past five years. Growth accelerated during Covid.

Some 38,000 (82%) of the Trustpilot reviews in the survey gave the law firm a five-star ranking and 4,000 a four-star rating – while 3,000 gave a rating of only one star. There was much less interest in awarding three stars (729) or two (616). This indicated that five-star reviews are becoming a hygiene factor rather than a differentiator.

The report said: “This leaves customers in the position that they can quickly identify firms with a bad reputation but find it difficult to differentiate between good ones. [DCTs] might respond by using more data in their reviews and the use of sentiment analysis to score firms based on the strength of feeling conveyed which may pose problems for firms that are not currently managing online sentiment, underlying customer service and quality of practice.

“If regulators and review sites do not tack in this direction, then consumers may be forced to use other means of selecting their preferred provider.”

In fairness, the legal regulators have responded, with the CMA breathing down their necks, of course. In February, the SRA teamed up with CILEX, the Council for Licensed Conveyancers and the Bar Standards Board to launch a six-month pilot, initially with 20 law firms and seven websites, to test how they could best work together to improve the information available to consumers.

Focusing initially on conveyancing and employment law services, the aim was to encourage dialogue between firms, websites, the regulators and the public about how best to expand the use and comparison of quality indicators.

By June, more than 70 law firms had signed up to the pilot, as had a further three DCTs, as the pilot was extended. The SRA said some firms reported that they were now incorporating customer feedback into individual staff performance reviews, adding them to the agenda at senior management meetings and using them as part of their rewards programmes, with positive feedback boosting staff morale.

“Many firms now routinely monitor for reviews submitted on different platforms and say that online reviews represent a core element of their approach to managing client feedback, both good and bad.”

80%

still considered reputation
most important when
choosing a provider



METHODOLOGY

In May/June 2021, IRN Research was commissioned by First4Lawyers to undertake a telephone survey of 100 solicitors working in consumer law firms.

The aim was to consider various issues including the use of client feedback and review sites, the importance of the customer journey, the role of marketing staff and marketing resources, website content and features, plus awareness of the SRA's Transparency Rules. The sample included managing partners, partners, owners, solicitors, and practice managers.

The interviews were conducted with 46 solicitors working in personal injury (PI), and 54 solicitors working in other consumer law areas, e.g. family law, conveyancing, wills & probate. Of the 46 working in PI, 34 were in PI in general practice firms and 12 were based in specialist PI firms. Of the 54 working in other consumer law areas, 46 were based in general practices and 8 were in specialist firms. The firms represented ranged in size from a turnover of less than £3m to one of more than £50m.

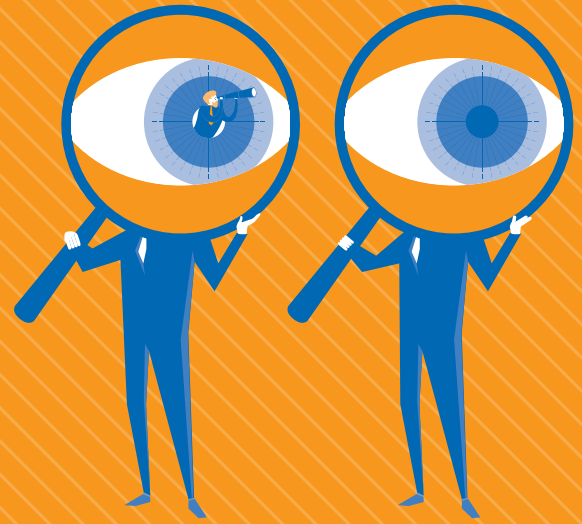




TAYLOR
ROSE^{MW}

Helen Lobozzo
head of client care

SMART
MODERN
LAW



Customer care is of such fundamental importance to Taylor Rose MW that it is one of the firm's core values.

The 58-partner full-service law firm, which has 31 offices around the country and headquarters in London, assesses the quality of the customer journey clients receive every month, with online customer reviews and client feedback surveys analysed and presented to the board.

Helen Lobozzo, head of client care at Taylor Rose MW, says: "Customer care is a core part of the business and goes right to the board of directors who have a keen interest in the whole customer experience for our clients.

"For us it is not just about getting a good resolution in the legal process, but also that they have a good experience and feel that we have been approachable. We want to be seen by our clients as an important part of their life and a helping hand in their time of need."

New clients often go through to a new business team working from 9am until 5pm who deal with the bulk of conveyancing enquiries (Taylor Rose MW is one of the country's biggest conveyancers). Most other cases, such as personal injury or clinical negligence, are transferred directly to a specialist lawyer to assess. Customers are given the option of coming into the office to discuss their case, but

the majority of communication is via email or on the phone. Identity verification and the transfer of documents generally takes place online.

Taylor Rose MW places a great deal of weight on online reviews and customer feedback surveys, which are constantly monitored. The firm has a rating of 4.6 on Trustpilot, 4.7 on Yell, 4.8 on ReviewSolicitors and 4.8 on Google.

Helen adds: "When it comes to online reviews, we have an internal traffic-light system in place whereby if an office drops into an amber or red category, then action is taken to address that fall in customer satisfaction. The traffic light has four lights – blue is 95% satisfaction, green 80%, amber 70% and red is less than 70%. When offices change category, we reach out to individuals associated with those offices and try to work out what has gone wrong."

The same hands-on approach is taken with individual online reviews and customer satisfaction surveys. A member of the client care team gets in touch with the client to see what went wrong and if anything could be learnt or improved.

The firm prides itself on good communication with clients and is developing new training to make lawyers more aware of how they interact with customers.

Helen says: "This training will help lawyers understand how they might react to certain communication styles. Our aim is to educate our lawyers as to the best ways of dealing with clients and give them the best possible customer service."

“For us it is not just about getting a good resolution in the legal process, but also that they have a good experience and feel that we have been approachable. We want to be seen by our clients as an important part of their life and a helping hand in their time of need.”

Helen Lobozzo, head of client care, Taylor Rose MW



WHAT WE FOUND

We commissioned IRN Research to look at law firms' approach to customer service more broadly, along with their engagement with reviews and other interactions with clients.

Service with a smile?

IRN Research found no one clear trend when interviewees were asked about their firm's attitude to customer service, but the largest percentage (41% of all firms) take the view that customer service is just as important as resolving a legal matter satisfactorily. Three in 10 of PI firms, but 37% of other firms, say customers just want their legal matter resolved.

The remaining quarter recognise that customer service is important but believe it is not as important as resolving a legal matter satisfactorily.

The traditional focus on getting the legal work done, though perfectly understandable and typical of solicitors of all stripes, is dangerous. Clients may not be able to assess the quality of your legal work, but they can judge the service they receive and, as is now clear, are increasingly happy to write about it online. This means customer service needs to be of equal importance.

Encouragingly, 86% of all law firms interviewed require fee-earners to adhere to service standards (91% of PI firms), yet only two-thirds of all firms (and 65% of PI firms) provide them with customer training. A smaller but still significant number, 56%, say they understand the customer journey and have mapped out all their interactions with the customer, with a communications plan for each stage. This is behaviour that five years ago would have been foreign to almost all and shows how far the profession has come. But there are clearly still improvements to be made.

When it comes to that all-important customer journey, PI firms are significantly hotter than general practices on agreeing costs from the start – 61% of PI firms make a priority of costs, compared to just 46% of other firms – while 53% of all firms ensure they have an agreed point of contact straight off. For something so basic, you might have hoped the latter figure would be higher.

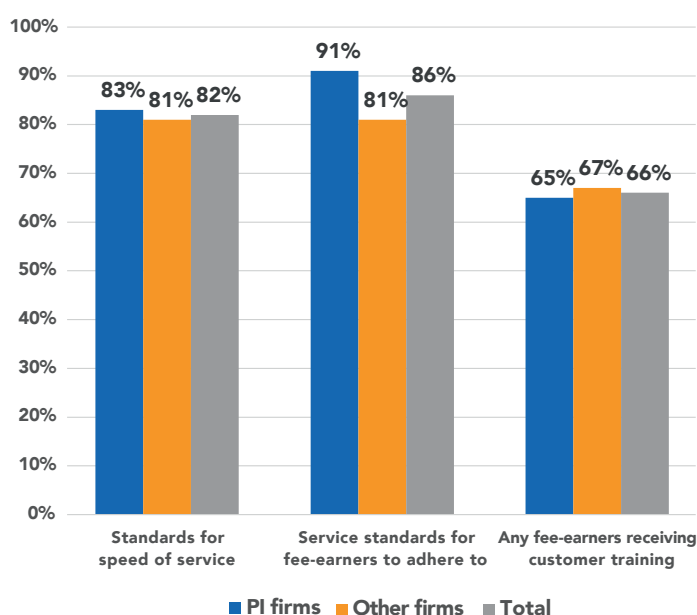
Half of all law firms say contact details are taken in a consistent manner, but all other elements of the customer journey – such as agreeing the format for communication

and the frequency of contact – were only mentioned by a minority of firms. Interestingly, in relation to almost every element surveyed, PI firms performed better. Does that come from being in a more cut-throat practice area?

Over a third of all firms (34%) – and 39% of PI firms – say they are more focused on getting work in and matters completed than the specifics of the customer journey, which again is shortsighted. Getting new work without a strong online reputation, which is heavily influenced by service quality, is only going to get harder.

Andy Cullwick, First4Lawyers' head of marketing, is encouraged by the results and says it is no surprise to see PI firms a little ahead of general practices in their focus on customer satisfaction. "The cost of doing business in PI is already so high and is continuing to rise," he explains. "You have to fight for every customer as much as possible."

Service standards and customer training in law firms (%)



“Many firms now routinely monitor for reviews submitted on different platforms and say that online reviews represent a core element of their approach to managing client feedback, both good and bad.”

CMA report

Signs of progress

Over the course of publishing our white papers, there are certain shortcomings in law firms' approach to prospective clients that we have come across time after time.

Our mystery shopping in previous years has highlighted problems with following up potential clients and tracking the success rate of converting them into clients. There has also been a frankly abject failure in dealing with out-of-hours and online enquiries, and in offering webchat facilities. Indeed, just having a mobile-optimised website, which is now a no-brainer in general marketing circles, has been a challenge for many.

The Glenesk research, which also included some mystery shopping, showed that these have not gone away. Two in three firms did not put calls (relating to a personal injury claim, conveyancing or a will) through to an informed team, five in six did not answer "basic questions" on service and price online or over the phone, three-quarters of firms did not call back customers when they committed to do so, and more than half of websites contained little to no pricing information on consumer law pages.

Our IRN Research found some higher-level progress, at least. PI firms are taking the lead on out-of-hours opening, with 52% offering services both in the evenings and weekends. Only 22% of other firms have evening services and 37% offer weekend services. Just 22% of PI firms, but 48% of other firms, have no out-of-hours capabilities.

Lawyers like evidence, of course, and 60% say they would consider Saturday opening if it could be shown that it increased business and customer satisfaction. Maybe they should try it and see - with hybrid working patterns set to be the norm, it would be possible for non-traditional office hours to be covered remotely.

Tracking conversion is another area where PI firms are much better, according to IRN, with 48% tracking how often follow-ups convert into business, compared to just 28% of other firms.

Most law firms appear to have embraced some basic website technologies: 69% of other firms, but only 48% of PI firms, have a webchat facility, while three-quarters of all firms have mobile optimised their websites.

Half of all law firms have made changes to their website ahead of this year's major Google algorithm changes but almost a third of the other law firms (31%) and a quarter of PI firms (26%) have not.

The feedback loop

Firms are far more proactive at the end of the process. An overwhelming majority of law firms, 86%, say they seek some form of client feedback at the conclusion of a matter (83% of PI firms and 89% of other firms), but only just over half have a systematic feedback system in place.

Just under half of all firms use their own feedback evaluation forms, while another 9% outsource the feedback to an external client satisfaction service (13% of PI firms compared to 6% of other firms).

Over a third of all firms (35%) take a selective approach, running telephone interviews with some clients after the end of a matter. This is particularly true of other firms, with 40% adopting such an approach, compared to 29% of PI firms.



“Actively wanting to hear from clients, something few seemed interested in not so long ago, is as good a sign of a customer-focused attitude as you can get. You still have to do something with the information, of course – and the best firms ensure it is monitored at board level – but this is the crucial first step.”

Andy Cullwick, head of marketing, First4Lawyers

Andy Cullwick says he is particularly pleased to see how attitudes have changed to seeking feedback like this. “Actively wanting to hear from clients, something few seemed interested in not so long ago, is as good a sign of a customer-focused attitude as you can get. You still have to do something with the information, of course – and the best firms ensure it is monitored at board level – but this is the crucial first step.”

More positively still, almost three-quarters (73%) maintain some relationship with clients once a matter is finished to offer other legal services.

What about online feedback sites, whether general sites like Trustpilot and Google Reviews or law-specific offerings like ReviewSolicitors? These are used by 55% of law firms in the survey, although only 47% (52% of PI firms and 43% of general firms) actually encourage their clients to post a review.

A third of firms use both general sites and law-specific sites. For no obvious reason, where a firm focuses only on one type, PI lawyers are far more likely to use a law-specific site (17%) than a general site (4%), whereas for other firms the figures were 11% and 13% respectively.

Firms were asked to explain their strategy when dealing with reviews. Fewer than a quarter (24%) of firms respond to every review, although this increases to 27% of PI

firms. The largest group (31% of all firms) only respond to selected reviews on an ad hoc basis but 42% of PI firms take this approach. There are 13% of firms that only respond to positive reviews and the same percentage to negative reviews.

We also asked the solicitors about how the world of DCTs should be developed – by the market or by the regulators. There is an almost equal split between those interviewees who would like to see the regulators themselves establishing a digital platform with standardised customer feedback (51% of all firms), and those that would expect to see the regulators support a market in review and ratings sites (49%). More PI firms support the latter option (52% compared to 46% of other firms).

A clear majority of firms (62%) agree that specific service data from independent public bodies should be a key part of any single digital register of law firms (this increases to 70% of PI firms).

Other features of a single digital register that appeal to a majority are customer reviews (56%), and complaints and disciplinary data (54%). There is less interest in star ratings (only mentioned by 38% overall but 48% of PI firms) and fees information (mentioned by 39% but a majority of PI firms at 57%).

Law firm responses to consumer reviews (%)

	PI	Other	Total
Never respond to any reviews	0%	9%	5%
Only respond to positive reviews	10%	14%	13%
Respond to each and every review	27%	19%	24%
Respond to some of the reviews on an-hoc basis	42%	21%	31%
Negative reviews prompt us to find client details and contact them independently to address any issues	10%	19%	15%
We only respond to the negative reviews	10%	14%	13%



Paul Rumley
lead partner for business development

When customers employ the clinical negligence team at Royds Withy King, they can expect a bespoke experience tailored to their individual needs.

The 74-partner full-service firm with seven offices across the country, including in London and its headquarters in Bath, recognises the importance of a smooth customer journey from initial contact to resolution of any case.

Paul Rumley, lead partner for business development in the clinical negligence department, says: "We are really proud of how we offer clients a truly individual service from the moment they call with how the case is run and even how it is funded. The whole journey roadmap is created to offer the best customer satisfaction."

That customer journey for clinical negligence clients begins with speaking to a member of a dedicated team made up entirely of paralegals, all specially trained in medical negligence law and in customer service. Working from 8.30am to 5.30pm, the team member has a series of questions to ask; the paralegals are recruited not only on their legal ability, but also for their interpersonal skills.

“ We are really proud of how we offer clients a truly individual service from the moment they call with how the case is run and even how it is funded.

Paul Rumley,
lead partner for
business development,
Royds Withy King



Out of office hours, potential clients speak to a call-back service and a paralegal will contact them the following day. Paul says: "We think it is important that people come through to a dedicated team with legal and customer service training who know the questions they need to ask. It is really important the paralegals we employ have excellent interpersonal skills as clients are talking about really personal matters. It is important that the client feels comfortable."

After the initial contact, cases go to a specialist team of fee-earners to determine their potential. Even if the answer is no, the fee-earner explains why they cannot take the case and offers advice about the best way forward for that individual.

Paul adds: "We aim to get back to the potential client on the same day or failing that the next day. The aim is to be as efficient as possible but also to offer a very specialised service. All of our cases are dealt with by a specialist clinical negligence lawyer after the initial call." Funding, including legal aid, is agreed before the case begins and documents are signed electronically.

"Each client is asked how they would like to communicate and how often that communication takes place. If a client wants to arrange to talk to their lawyer at 6am in the morning, they can do that."

Prospective clients can also contact the firm through its website and engage via chat service.

Feedback is through the firm's own electronic system, but Royds Withy King is also on Trustpilot. The results of the firm's customer service are reflected in its score: 4.54 out of five after more than 400 reviews.

Paul concludes: "The changes I have seen over the past 25 years are huge. Nowadays customer service is massively important as people rightly shop around when looking for legal services. The first impression we give is crucial. Having excellent customer service and a defined customer journey are one of the most important factors for any modern law firm."



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR LAW FIRMS

What we are talking about here is online reputation and everything that goes into it – from the substantial (the actual legal work), to the subjective (views on the service received) to the ephemeral (what's said about you online).

"This is not an optional extra," says Andy Cullwick. "Clients no longer walk down to the high street and through the solicitor's door – they do it virtually. The wisdom of the crowd is now crucial."

Glenesk showed that around 20% of law firms in its survey were losing out by failing to effectively manage their online reputation. One problem for broader practices was that a number which had three or four very good practice areas had their reputation dragged down by what was happening in another area.

The company found that conveyancing generated the most positive reviews, followed by personal injury, wills and probate, employment and family. Analysis of the content of the reviews showed that the most common complaints from clients were failure to advise, failure to progress and failure to keep informed, which have been the staple of the Legal Ombudsman's work long before DCTs came on the scene. This was followed by excessive cost.

Its mystery shopping exercise found that the performance of the best-performing Trustpilot firms in terms of information on websites and responses to initial enquiries was "not significantly better than those receiving less glowing customer feedback".

This "may highlight the gap between online reputation management and real differences" in customer service. It may also indicate that customers discount their initial interactions with a provider when offering online feedback after the service has concluded.

For Glenesk, "the clear winners" would be the law firms that have both a strategy to actively manage their online brands and "an embedded culture of optimising every engagement with consumers". Remember too that better reviews lead to more click-throughs to your site and then to higher Google rankings.

There is no shortage of review platforms, although Trustpilot and Feefo are very much to the fore in the general marketplace. Trustpilot is an open platform, meaning anyone can leave a review, while Feefo is closed to actual clients only at the prompting of the firm.

But there's also Google reviews – which can impact on your Google rating – Facebook and other social media.

You can set up brand monitoring in your social media publishing software. Then there are websites you may not have thought about, like recruitment platform Glassdoor,

“ *Clients no longer walk down to the high street and through the solicitor's door – they do it virtually. The wisdom of the crowd is now crucial.*

Andy Cullwick,
head of marketing,
First4Lawyers

”



which give star ratings. The number is only going to multiply in all likelihood, so you need to choose a handful to focus on and keep an eye on the others.

The 'big three' are Trustpilot, Google and Facebook. Andy Cullwick suggests small firms start with Google reviews given its general dominance. The problem with Google is that it is harder to get negative reviews taken down than other platforms but of course firms can respond to the comments. First4Lawyers always responds to reviews the same day – you can set up alerts rather than having to constantly check.

Sam Borrett, director of legal digital marketing agency Legmark, says that, before signing up to review websites, firms should tackle any existing known issues around customer service, create a resource internally for handling reviews, and set up a review process with targets on how quickly responses to reviews are made.

"Don't be scared of negative reviews. If you only ever listen to the pats on the back and words of praise, you'll only ever believe you're amazing. Sure, it's nice to know you're appreciated, but it's only when you hear the constructive feedback can you improve," he says.

"A 100% or 10/10 review rating is simply not believable. No company perfectly satisfies all its customers every time – and that's OK because people realise this. However, the

way that you deal with a negative response speaks volumes about the business and can actually have more impact on potential clients than reading pages of positive reviews.

"Properly handling negative reviews also tells you so much more about your business and how you can improve and prevent similar problems in future by perhaps adjusting internal processes or client communication."

Andy Cullwick agrees and urges firms to think how they approach online shopping outside of work. "Consumers – that is, you and me – aren't stupid. We get suspicious if every review of a company is five stars, unless there is such volume that it is unlikely to be fake, although conversely if every review is one star, we are likely to be discouraged.

"What we do is look at the middle – it's a bit like the Olympic diving where they discard the top and bottom scores to arrive at the overall mark."

You have to embrace negative reviews, he continues, if you want to remove complacency and drive improvement. "Celebrate the five-star reviews and take the one-star reviews with a thick skin. Don't think that you're automatically right and the client's automatically wrong."

Helen Hamilton-Shaw, member engagement and strategy director at LawNet, argues that firms which close their eyes to the rising influence of review sites are ignoring today's reality.

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“If reviews are not a priority in your current marketing mix, I challenge you to look at your own behaviour. When did you last book a restaurant without first reading reviews from previous guests, or check out the user experience on a consumer product before committing to the purchase?”

Helen Hamilton-Shaw, member engagement and strategy director, LawNet

“As a result, they are likely to miss out on a great opportunity to reach tomorrow’s clients by showcasing the positive reviews given by today’s satisfied customers. Where word of mouth was once limited to conversations between friends and colleagues, online channels have limitless audience reach, and research shows that over 90% of consumers reference online reviews as part of their buying journey. Firms need to take a strategic, proactive approach.

“If reviews are not a priority in your current marketing mix, I challenge you to look at your own behaviour. When did you last book a restaurant without first reading reviews from previous guests, or check out the user experience on a consumer product before committing to the purchase?”

The reality is, she points out, that even if firms try to opt out, “you cannot stop information being shared online nor control the journey by which clients reach you”.

This highlights why it is so important to be proactive in dealing with online commentary, rather than firefighting later. “While the routes may have changed in recent years, referral remains one of the most important drivers of new instructions, as evidenced by our own research and that of other professional sector bodies,” Ms Hamilton-Shaw says.

“The opportunity to reach potential clients with positive endorsements at the start of their buying journey should be a compulsion for firms.”

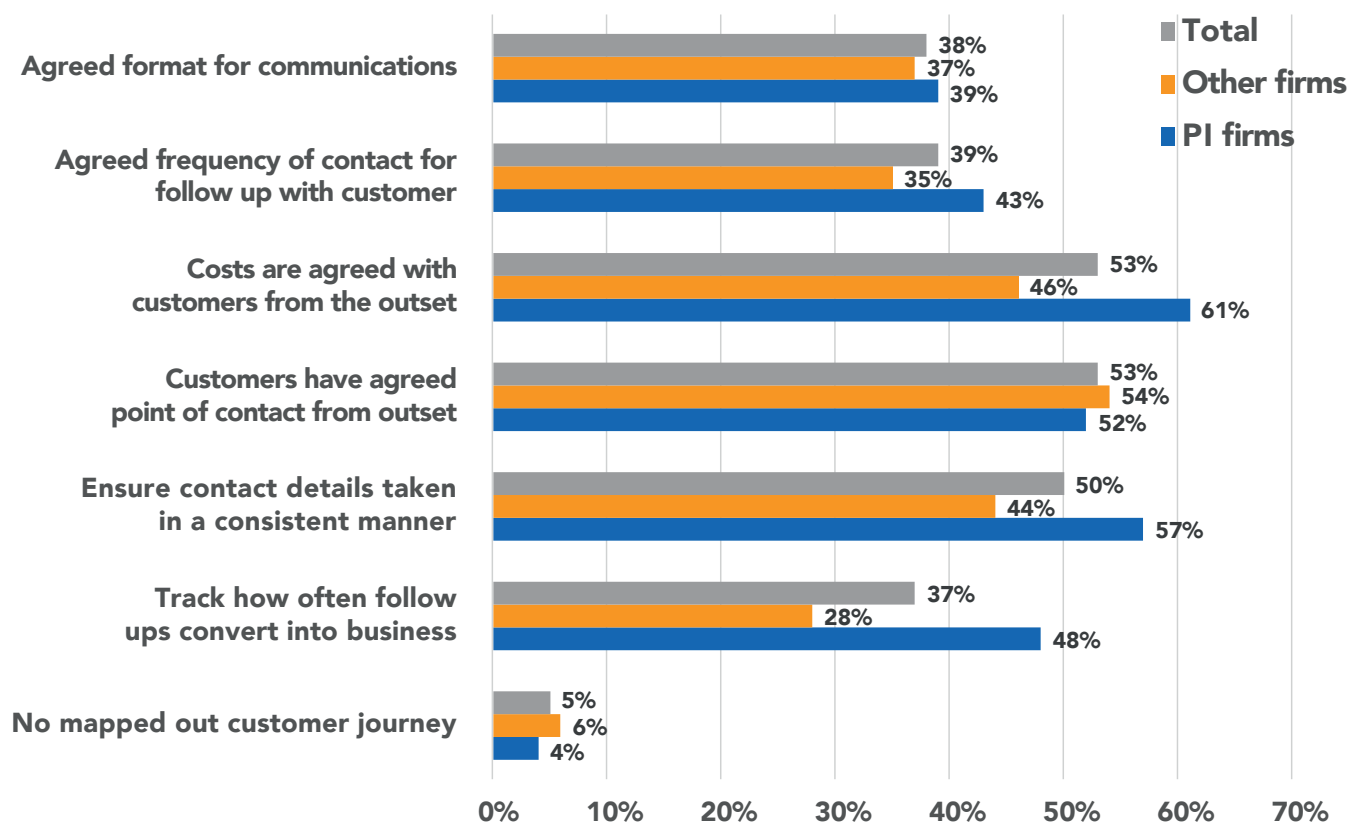
Those firms that have embraced online reviews are very positive about them. A *Legal Futures* webinar earlier this year heard strong encouragement to take part.

Clive Meredith, practice director of West Country practice Wollens, urged law firms to address online reviews but said they had to go into it with their eyes open. “You are going to get occasional bad reviews... Sometimes they’re justified, sometimes they’re not. There is a tendency in legal that if everything isn’t perfect, we shouldn’t try it. That doesn’t work with client reviews.”

He said Wollens signed up to ReviewSolicitors when it was seeing more reviews appear online and fewer new clients simply walking through the door. “It’s really changed the culture of the firm into being far more service driven, and not just legal driven... Bringing that



Elements of the customer journey covered by law firms (%)



service feel into a law firm hasn't been easy at times, but this has been the one thing that has changed the culture."

Whereas previously many fee-earners only received feedback from clients when something had gone wrong, now they were able to celebrate positive reviews too. Mr Meredith said: "The lawyers love it – it breeds healthy competition... and cultivates good behaviours." The system also helps Wollens judge clients' views on value for money and appropriate fee levels.

Amy Thomas, head of client development at national giant Irwin Mitchell, said negative reviews were almost more important than positive ones, as it helped the firm understand how to improve the customer experience. She added: "We've worked hard to create a bit of a culture where feedback isn't about an individual's performance."

The feedback is instead fed into possible training needs or operational changes. She noted that, "more often than not" clients who have had their concerns addressed would update their review to report a positive outcome.

“ You are going to get occasional bad reviews... Sometimes they're justified, sometimes they're not. There is a tendency in legal that if everything isn't perfect, we shouldn't try it. That doesn't work with client reviews. **”**

Clive Meredith,
practice director,
Wollens



MAKING YOUR WEBSITE WORK FOR YOU

Andy Cullwick,
head of marketing, First4Lawyers

Too many businesses, legal and non-legal, do not invest the right levels of resource and effort into their websites. They become vanity projects built on subjective opinion rather than data-driven fact and business improvement programmes.

Decisions will be made on someone, usually a key stakeholder, liking the look of a homepage, be it the font, colour or image used.

So, what elements do you need to focus on to make sure your website delivers?

Let's assume that it's working really well. You've got a well-written website selling the different aspects of your firm, along with strong, clear calls to action and a simple user journey. You then need to look at how you drive people to your shop window.

There are three main ways you do this:

- Organic visitors – someone goes to Google (or other search engines) and types in a specific search query around a legal matter. If your website is optimised well enough, then it will appear in one of the organic positions and people will potentially click through to your site.
- Paid visitors – using paid for digital marketing activities such as pay per click, display advertising or advertising through social media channels to proactively target people potentially looking for your services and driving them directly to your website.
- Direct visitors – this is in essence brand awareness. The visitor knows who you are and what your web address is and they go direct to your website.

I am going to focus on the first category. There are many elements needed to get your website to rank and by now (hopefully) many people know at least the basics of search engine optimisation, such as content writing, keywords and link building.

However, Google being Google means the art of getting your website to the top of the rankings is cloaked in secrecy and, unfortunately, a certain amount of guesswork. Google releases algorithm updates that can send your website ranking tumbling as easily as it can skyrocket. Generally, you don't know when these algorithms are

“ Generally, you don't know when these algorithms are going to be released or what will be or has been included in them. You will be left scratching your head as to what is driving your web position on more than one occasion.

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going to be released or what will be or has been included in them. You will be left scratching your head as to what is driving your web position on more than one occasion.

Google has been busy this year and we believe they have implemented at least eight algorithm updates, including four around page experience. Page experience is the big thing that website owners need to focus on right now. It splits into four areas:

- Mobile usability – how well does your website work on mobile devices?
- HTTPS – is your website secure and has the latest SSL on it to make the connection secure?
- No intrusive interstitials – the content on your website is easily accessible to the user. Broadly, this means there aren't any pop-ups or things that get in the way of a good user experience.
- Core web vitals – this is the big one and focuses on the aspects of loading, interactivity and visual stability of your website. If you haven't got this right then you will likely see the organic performance of your website suffer (if it hasn't already).

What Google is looking for in relation to core web vitals is three-fold:

- Largest contentful paint (LCP): This measures loading performance. To provide a good user experience, strive to have LCP occur within the first 2.5 seconds of the page starting to load.
- First input delay (FID): This measures interactivity, i.e. when you can actually see the website properly. To provide a good user experience, strive to have an FID of less than 100 milliseconds.
- Cumulative layout shift (CLS): This measures visual stability, meaning things don't shift about on the page as it is loading. To provide a good user experience, strive to have a CLS score of less than 0.1.

HELLO

A marketer with more than twenty years' experience, Andy joined First4Lawyers from the international automotive world at the start of 2014. Since arriving at First4Lawyers' Huddersfield HQ, Andy has revolutionised the First4Lawyers marketing approach.

As guardian of the First4Lawyers brand, he is responsible for customer and business marketing. He is well-known to his colleagues for his unfaltering devotion to spreadsheets, which allow him to track in real-time just how well First4Lawyers' marketing is performing.

First4Lawyers' continued success has meant significant investment in the marketing team at their Huddersfield HQ. Andy leads specialist teams across web, social media, TV and various channels that help their customers find them. Alongside managing director Qamar Anwar, Andy is a passionate spokesperson on the changing personal injury landscape, earning him the moniker of "Mr Angry" amongst his colleagues, particularly in relation to insurers' behaviour, speaking out in favour of the consumer.

THE NEXT STEPS

The issue of customer service and feedback is only going to get bigger – there's no point closing your eyes and hoping it will go away. Indeed, no law firm can afford to ignore it – even the largest commercial law firms now attract online reviews and while a web presence is not so important for them for work generation, it does help to reinforce their reputation, skills and ability.

Law firm marketing has rapidly become digital first and you need to take control of what is being said about your firm online. There are practical consequences too – not responding to reviews can affect your website's page rankings.

There is a disconnect, I suggest, between firms that say they rely on their reputation to bring in work but are then wary of client reviews. Equally, "word of mouth now is going online to see what people are saying, rather than Joe telling Fred about the solicitor they used".

There are four key messages to take away from this report:

Prioritise customer service and invest in training

Don't assume that your front-line call handlers and fee-earners have an innate ability to deliver excellent customer service. The soft skills required to show empathy and build rapport may not come naturally to some, but these are skills that can be learnt and developed and as well as

helping to improve your customer service levels training in this area can also help you to convert potential clients in the first place. Customer service training should be ongoing and include regular refresher sessions. It's often the simple things that are forgotten, but these things can make a big difference to the way a client views your firm.

Create and continually review the customer experience

Every firm has a process for dealing with incoming enquiries, even if it is simple and informal. Now is the time to think in more depth about how clients experience your firm and map what each stage looks like. Then create and implement a plan of what they should look like.

Don't think that, once you've done this, you can forget about it. You need to continually review the process to ensure that it is delivering what it should. Walk in your clients' shoes – undertake some mystery shopping of your own. You may well be surprised by what you discover. This leads to the third take away.



Word of mouth now is going online to see what people are saying, rather than Joe telling Fred about the solicitor they used.

Andy Cullwick, head of marketing, First4Lawyers



Don't be afraid of reviews

Reviews are integral to understanding what clients want and how they want it. The notion raised in the survey of clients just wanting their matter resolved is not a sentiment shared by actual clients. As anyone who has bought a house this year can tell you, the biggest frustration with lawyers is communication and service.

First4Lawyers' research indicates that reviews are more often about communication than anything else. They are, ultimately, the best way to test the customer journey you have developed.

Stay on top of your website

There is a misguided belief that, once you build a website, the traffic will come and that a website is a free marketing tool. The reality is that building and managing a website is an expensive and time heavy investment.

Website optimisation is a technical business and you will need outside help – but the investment should pay itself back quickly if done properly.

Andy Cullwick,
head of marketing, First4Lawyers



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