

FEATURE ARTICLE

When You're Unavailable, Who Gets Your Client?

POOR COVERAGE DOESN'T JUST RISK ONE MATTER. IT CAN HAND ANOTHER LAWYER THE OPPORTUNITY TO WIN THE ENTIRE RELATIONSHIP.

By Stephen Furnari, Corporate Attorney & Owner, Law Firm Suites

As a corporate attorney, I provide legal services. But as a business owner and investor, I'm also a frequent buyer of them. A recent experience reminded me how easily a law firm can put an existing client relationship at risk.

I was preparing an offer on a commercial property and wanted a real estate lawyer I've used before—and like—to review the contract and an addendum I had drafted. I needed perhaps an hour of his time.

His email autoresponder said he was away until January 1. It was August. His office clarified that he was actually overseas for several weeks, largely unreachable—and had no lawyer covering matters that couldn't wait.

So I started looking elsewhere.

THE MATTER MISSED MAY NOT BE THE MATTER YOU LOSE

My lawyer seemingly missed an hour of work. But if the property goes under contract, I'll also need title and closing help. And I regularly hire lawyers and refer work to attorneys I trust.

Lawyers often evaluate an unanswered inquiry as one lost matter. Clients and referral sources may evaluate it as information about whether they should send the next matter.

There's another risk: force a good client to find another lawyer, and you may unintentionally audition your replacement.

GOOD COVERAGE PROTECTS CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

None of this means lawyers shouldn't take real vacations. They should. The solution is having trusted colleagues who can step in when something cannot wait.

One solo attorney I know arranges for two trusted lawyers available to cover emergencies when she travels, and reciprocates when they are away. Better to give some work to a trusted colleague than force a client into the open market looking for a replacement.

BUILD THE SYSTEM BEFORE YOU LEAVE

Coverage requires more than an autoresponder. Identify lawyers you trust. Establish reciprocal coverage. Give staff clear instructions for urgent matters. Make necessary files accessible. Notify affected clients. And check your voicemail and autoresponder before leaving.

The goal isn't to make yourself reachable on vacation. It's to build a practice that can take care of clients when you aren't.

WHEN YOU'RE AWAY KEEP YOUR CLIENTS

DESIGNATE BACKUP COUNSEL

Identify one or two trusted attorneys who can step in when something cannot wait. Agree on the arrangement in advance and reciprocate when they need coverage.

GIVE YOUR STAFF A PLAN

Make sure whoever answers your phone knows when you'll return, what constitutes an urgent matter, and exactly where to send something that cannot wait.

KEEP NEW INQUIRIES MOVING

Don't let potential new matters sit unanswered. Even if you can't take the work, acknowledge the inquiry, set expectations, or make a referral.

CHECK CLIENT COMMUNICATIONS

Notify clients who may need you while you're away. Update your voicemail and auto-responder, and make sure backup counsel can access the files and information they may need.

“When a client has to find another lawyer, you may be giving your competitor an audition.”

RESPONSIVENESS CREATES OPPORTUNITY

Law firms spend enormous amounts of time and money trying to generate new business. Yet my recent experience suggests a simpler opportunity: your competitors may simply be bad at responding.

I was actively looking to hire a lawyer and had difficulty finding one who was both available and responsive. That should be encouraging to any small firm trying to grow.

You don't have to take every matter or answer every question immediately. But acknowledge the inquiry, set expectations and follow up. When another lawyer goes silent or leaves a client without coverage, being the lawyer who responds may be enough to get an audition for the entire client relationship.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Furnari is a corporate attorney and the owner of Law Firm Suites, a professional workspace community for lawyers with locations in NYC, White Plains and Annapolis. He works closely with attorneys building more focused, efficient, and growth-oriented practices.

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