

# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin

Volume 158, No. 79

## Legal, restaurant industries share need to make a good impression

Six months ago, I went to a newly opened restaurant with my wife. On the way, it occurred to me that the service and product you get at a great restaurant is similar to the service and product a great attorney provides to his or her clients.

Upon arriving at the restaurant, the valet pleasantly and immediately greeted us. We entered the restaurant and were almost acknowledged by a somewhat snobby hostess. We are not famous people and thus were made to feel irrelevant. Although we had a reservation, we waited 20 minutes to be seated. Not a good first impression. But, friends had told us the food was great, so we waited.

I liken this to a new client calling a law firm and speaking with a receptionist who is off-putting or slow to connect a call. Or, worse yet, dropping the call. I can only imagine what a new client must feel like if she calls her law firm midday, only to have the call transferred into the firm's general voice mail with no prompt return call. The same applies if a new client calls her lawyer directly and does not receive a prompt return call. First impressions formed by clients are often indelible, whether made by a restaurant, law firm, accounting firm or any other service industry.

Back at the restaurant, our waiter arrived to introduce himself and take our drink order. He explained that the restaurant was crowded and the kitchen was backed up. He asked that we be patient and promised to get our drinks quickly, which he did. When he delivered the drinks he mentioned that it would be 10 to 15 minutes before he could take our food order, but that he would have bread delivered. We found him quite pleasant and truly appreciated him taking the initiative to tell us when he would return to our table.

Fifteen minutes passed and we started to grow frustrated. Our

frustration stemmed from the waiter's assurance that he would do what he said he would do, when he said he would do it. After almost 25 minutes of waiting, we were ready to leave. Just then, our waiter appeared and said he was sorry, blah blah blah. He volunteered that the drinks were "on the house." Whoopie! Why, we wondered, couldn't the waiter have come to us after 10 minutes and said, "I apologize, but it will likely be closer to 25 minutes instead of 10 to 15 minutes." If he had done this, and thus recalibrated our expectations, we would have ordered another drink and had a few more pieces of bread.

This reminded me of attorneys who tell clients that a draft contract or pleading will be delivered for client review on a certain date and then not, beforehand, communicating to the client the need to extend the delivery date. I believe most clients respond positively when their lawyer has a reasonable explanation for needing to push back a promised delivery date — and that explanation is provided to the client before the original delivery date expires.

Before we placed our order, we asked the waiter how long it would take for our dinner to arrive because we were on a tight schedule to make an 8:30 movie. He said 15 minutes. With warranted suspicion dripping from our mouths, we placed our order. To our surprise the food did come, but even earlier than promised. Now came the moment of truth. We tasted our food and, to our disappointment, it was mediocre at best. "I can't believe after all of this waiting the food tastes like this," I said. Food is a restaurant's work product and is ultimately the most important thing by which a restaurant is measured.

The same can be said of a lawyer's work product. If a new client receives a sloppy or incomplete work product, their confidence in the lawyer is shot. No



*Joshua S. Hyman is a shareholder with Chuhak & Tesson P.C. and co-chairs the firm's 18-attorney bank practice group. Since 1989, Josh has provided banks and commercial finance companies, including both national institutions and locally based lenders, with results-oriented, efficient and highly responsive representation in a broad range of matters, including structuring loan transactions, negotiating, and drafting loan and collateral documents. He also advises lenders and other secured creditors in bankruptcy proceedings, workouts and other creditors' rights matters, as well as representing them in lender liability suits.*

pleasantries by the lawyer can overcome mediocre legal work. A client normally turns a deaf ear to excuses or explanations from her lawyer about why a contract clause was overlooked or why a pleading missed important arguments. They are paying us to be thorough, detailed and reliable.

After finishing the mediocre meal, we got our bill. Because I was frustrated with the dinner experience, I scrutinized the bill, hoping to find an error. And, wouldn't you know it, we were charged for a full order of pasta when we had ordered and received a half order of pasta. With bitterness in my tone, I brought this to the attention of our waiter who again offered maddening explanations. In that moment it occurred to me how utterly offensive it is for a lawyer's client to get an invoice reflecting a different hourly rate than was initially agreed upon or showing obviously inflated time on task.

After exiting the restaurant, we gave our ticket to the valet who, again, was prompt and smiling when he delivered our car. When we drove off, our frustration amped up our desire to tell friends and family how crappy the restaurant was. The same is true in the legal industry. If a client perceives us to be arrogant, condescending, providers of a poor work product or billing inflated charges, they too will leave our office with the conviction to tell anyone who will listen how poor the experience was. And it is almost a certainty that we will never see that client again, which of course means we will never get a referral to a new prospect from the unhappy client.

Six months later, the new restaurant we visited had closed. Apparently, we were not the only ones who received bad service and mediocre food. Lawyers who provide their clients with bad service, mediocre work product and questionable billing practices ... beware.

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