

EARNING CLIENTS' TRUST DURING THE INITIAL INTERVIEW

By Noelle Nelson



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A client's trust is a critical element in any client-attorney relationship. Without trust clients will continually question your decisions and strategies, making a good working relationship virtually impossible. Having gained their trust, your clients will more easily follow your suggestions and be much more willing to cooperate.

Don't expect prospective clients to automatically trust you because you are a lawyer. In fact, the opposite may be true. You must win their trust. How well you listen and respond to their concerns during a case will affect how much trust your clients feel for you. It may even influence the ultimate outcome of a case.

You begin to earn the trust of your clients the minute they walk through your door. The initial interview, in fact, can set the tone for the entire case. How you interact with clients during your first meeting with them, therefore, is critical. You may see the initial interview as just a fact-finding process. Your clients think otherwise. It's their time to tell their story—a story in which they have been wrongly treated—either as the accuser or the

accused. For many clients, their stories are very personal, and they are looking for an attorney who understands and cares.

Tip One: Avoid interruptions during the initial client interview. Clients are baring their soul to you, a stranger, in many cases, whom they have come to for help. The last thing they want to have happen is for you to constantly take cell phone calls or glance at your Blackberry every time a new message pops up. An interruption, no matter how short, represents to clients a shift in attention away from their needs. Clients will inevitably ask, "Does this attorney have time for me?" or "Is she really listening?"

During the initial interview you may be taking client matters very seriously, but by accepting telephone calls and other interruptions, you are not communicating that attitude to the client. Avoid interruptions during the first two or three meetings with new clients. Afterwards, if a comfort level has been established, allow a few interruptions, but only for critical matters.

Tip Two: Stay focused on your client. Listen carefully. Avoid the temptation of jumping in while they are talking. Also, don't give legal opinions until after you have heard your clients' entire story and have enough facts to do so.

Maintain good eye contact. Listening happens as much with the eyes as it does with the ears. The first time you meet clients, be sure to look at them clearly and directly, eye to eye. Eye contact is the single most powerful way to communicate care and interest—especially when the client is speaking.

Your body language also says a lot about whether you are paying attention to the client....The most effective body position that conveys interest is "sitting square." The sitting

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square position is one in which you hold your back relatively straight, pitch your upper body slightly forward, face the client directly, keep your arms either on your desk or on the arms of your chair and, of course, maintain good eye contact. This position says you are open and ready to listen to the client. Imagine how clients would react if your arms were folded on your chest (a classic defensive position), or your head is lazily propped up by a hand (barely able to stay awake?). Neither of these displays a sense of attention.

Tip Three: Find common ground. We relate more easily with people with whom we get along well and understand—whether as friends or in establishing business relationships. This is also true in the client-attorney context. By fostering common understanding, you are encouraging your clients to put their trust in you.

Create common ground through body language and vocal tone. You can begin to establish common ground with your client by emphasizing those aspects of your behavior that are similar to your clients' behavior. This technique is called "mirroring." We use mirroring on an unconscious level all the time. When we're at a bar association meeting, our body language and speech patterns reflect those of other attorneys in the room.

When we take in a basketball game, we don a completely different appearance and speaking style that better fits the event.

This same mirroring technique can be used in meetings with clients. When clients sit across from you, notice the position of their torso, arms and legs. Allow your body to take roughly the same position. Unconsciously, this mirroring will allow the client to relax. So will mirroring your clients' verbal style. Is your clients' speech rapid or slow, loud or soft, verbose or concise? Allow your speech to shift somewhat to reflect your clients' style.

By always putting yourself in the shoes of your clients you will better understand what they expect from you. Understanding what they want out of the relationship gives you the necessary insight to earn their respect, cooperation and trust.

Noelle C. Nelson, Ph.D. is a trial consultant who provides trial/jury strategy, witness preparation and focus groups for attorneys. Her published works include *A Winning Case* (Prentice Hall), *Connecting With Your Client* (American Bar Association), *The Power of Appreciation in Business* (MindLab Publishing), and the booklet, *101 Winning Tips: How to Give a Good Deposition and Testify Well in Court*. More information is available at www.dr.noellenelson.com. You can contact Ms. Nelson via e-mail at nnelson@