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PROPERTY NEWS
WINDHOEK

Dear Sir/Madam

OUR CLIENTS ARE ALWAYS RIGHT OR ARE THEY

The challenges facing the modern-day conveyancer are immense and go far beyond the intricacies of the discipline itself. Today the conveyancing fraternity and those operating within its parameters have to find innovative ways and means of coping with the fast growing demands of the profession.

The conveyancer has to be an expert property lawyer, marketer of magnitude, personnel manager, IT expert and educator alike. Our responsibility in upholding our elitist reputation amongst the demise of many State departments and the ethics of some of our colleagues categorised as "marketing" is one of grave consequence. It can truly be said that a conveyancer by any other name could smell sweeter – with apologies to the great master Shakespear.

THE AIM OF THE ARTICLE

It is, however, not the aim of this article to debate on our protracted dealings with the State Departments and Councils upon which we depend for efficiency, neither to engage in a heated debate on the grey no-man's land of "marketing" by conveyancers.

The aim of this article is to give a few pointers on the betterment of our practices in areas that are still under our total control, one of which is to add value to client satisfaction. In the age of globalization and ultra-technology it is surprising how much can still be achieved by applying relationship-orientated skills in our client relationships.

WHY GO BACK TO BASICS?

Sadly, a great percentage of conveyancing practices still lack the most fundamental competencies and basic conformity to rules relating to client satisfaction. Irrespective of whether your turnover time affords you the number one position on a corporate panel, we are all vulnerable to that one dreaded phone call from a corporate manager indicating the dissatisfaction of one single mortgagor or purchaser that allegedly reported us for rendering unsatisfactory service. In most instances such a complaint, in all reality does not warrant the lengths the client went in reporting us.

Unfortunately for us, the words of one unhappy member of the public will forever be lodged in the long-term memory of a bank manager or estate agent. We are all susceptible to the aforementioned scenario:

- **OUR PRACTICE STRUCTURE**

If we accept that our practices exist and will continue to exist only as long as they continue to satisfy the needs of our clients, we must ensure that our practices have structures in place that will enable them to deliver.

If our practices are to survive today's fast changing environment, we need to be more responsive to the needs of our clients meaning shorter chains of communication and command and instilling a client-friendly attitude in every single employee. More often a client is told that the conveyancer or paralegal dealing with a specific matter is unavailable and that no-one else can assist. If one thinks about this from one's own perspective, the solution is as simple as changing one's mindset and that of our employees. A simple gesture of making the client feel important by listening attentively and assuring a quick response, as opposed to getting rid of the client as soon as possible will mostly do the trick.

- **ALL CLIENTS ARE EQUAL**

This statement is debatable. Consider the following: the top 20% of clients generate 80% of our profits, half of which is lost in revenue and time by serving the bottom half of unprofitable clients. As conveyancers, our unprofitable clients are those who do not pay our accounts or those who demand too much for too little revenue. Contrary to popular belief, conveyancers carry their fair share of pro amico work. It is by no means wrong to render your services on a charitable basis in limited deserving instances and this should be encouraged.

- **DESSERVICE WITH A SMILE! ?**

In a busy conveyancing practice, an analogy can almost be drawn between a production line and the registration of transfers and bonds. In these circumstances, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that for most individuals a visit to the offices of an attorney may occur once or twice in a lifetime. This rings even more true in the case of property transactions especially being mindful of the fact that this is in all probability the single biggest financial transaction ever to be concluded by that person – a daunting prospect.

In the initial stages these clients need to be put at ease and gain confidence in the ability of your firm to serve their interests, particularly having regard to the predisposition the name "Attorney" carries amongst the public. Friendly staff and helpful attention by the first member of your staff with whom this client comes into contact will go a long way to achieving these initial goals even if the correct and sought-after information is not available at that stage.

- **GIVE UNHELPFUL MONOSYLLABIC ANSWERS, ESPECIALLY "NO"**

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Some conveyancers get it right, others not, but most of us (the author not excluded) will at some point come across as generally unhelpful and pained by the effort of attending to a client either telephonically or in person. This is especially true in instances where clients arrive unannounced demanding an audience or those who seem to refuse to use their cognitive abilities to understand that you as the conveyancer cannot provide them with the proceeds of a bond that is not yet registered! It is suggested that empathy is probably the best option, as the client's request is often irrational and "No" will never be the right answer!

- **DO NOT ANSWER LETTERS OR RETURN CALLS AND IGNORE CLIENT COMPLAINTS?**

It will suffice to say that this is a serious problem for attorneys and a sore topic for clients and colleagues alike. It is almost a certainty that none of us will deliberately ignore complaints, calls and letters.

This problem should largely be attributed to incorrect channeling and fallible infrastructure:

- Do you have formal complaint procedures?
- When a client first calls to complain, are your personnel sympathetic or sullen?
- Does every single employee in your firm know that the client's complaint is always valid, no matter how outrageous it is?
- Are there procedures in place that will enable you to deal with urgent phone calls and attend to urgent incoming post on a daily basis?

- **THE OTHER CLIENTS?**

It is often overlooked that employees, too are customers of the firm with whom an exchange of values must take place. Disloyal, unhappy, under-stimulated, unenthusiastic internal clients cannot really service and satisfy external clients.

- **DON'T DESPAIR**

Sophisticated marketing techniques and high-technology computers, are here to stay, but can never eradicate indifference nor can it replace basic common-sense service that is executed in a consistent and professional manner.

Ultimately, the best form of marketing is to get your clients to do the marketing for you. The power of word-of-mouth and personal recommendation is probably the strongest form of communication and persuasion. Those who give this reward will be those who perceive the experience as one of quality.

In the words of William A Foster:

"Quality is never an accident; it is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction and skilful execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives."

Yours faithfully
DR WEDER, KAUTA & HOVEKA INC

Per: A SWANEPOEL