

**Lawyers and law firms:
What you don't know CAN hurt you**

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Almost all client defections are predictable – and therefore avoidable – if only lawyers and law firms possess the right information.

“Information is the power you need to control your reputation and career,” said Shari Harley. “You never want to be caught by surprise.”

Harley is founder of Shari Harley LLC (www.shariharley.com), a Denver-based training and consulting firm that helps organizations create more candid relationships with clients and employees. She spoke as part of the July program of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association, held July 13 at Primebar in downtown Denver.

“Never assume that you know what a client or co-worker is saying about you to others,” said Harley. “You might think that you are good at what you do and how you do it, but the fact is that you are not the judge. Your clients and co-workers are the judges. You are only as good as other people say you are.”

The easiest way to get the correct information about your reputation -- how well or how poorly you are satisfying your clients and co-workers – is to ask. Before asking, you must give the client or co-worker permission to provide honest feedback.

“It is much more comfortable to ask questions about your performance when you’ve laid the groundwork at the very start of any professional relationship,” said Harley. “These tactics work with clients – and with supervisors, colleagues and direct reports.

“Start off with this statement: ‘I want to have a great relationship with you. If I do *anything* that violates your expectations or frustrates you, please tell me. I promise that, no matter what you say, I will say “thank you.”’ Grant permission, ask questions and establish expectations up front,” said Harley.

Harley also recommends following up on that statement with a series of “get to know you” questions. “Asking questions up front is a great differentiator,” said Harley.

“Surprisingly, very few professional service providers actually do this. It costs you nothing and sets you apart from your competitors.”

Good starter questions include:

- Do you prefer to communicate via email or voicemail?
- Do you prefer scheduled appointments or can I drop by?
- Do you prefer phone or in-person meetings?
- What do you want to meet about? How often?
- What would you like me to be involved with?
- What *don't* you want me involved with?
- What are your pet peeves in a working relationship?

It also helps to ask a few questions to determine how much a client or co-worker knows about what you do.

“Clients and co-workers cannot turn to you for help if they are unclear about your capabilities,” said Harley. “Make sure that the people you work with are aware of your talents and skills. Speak on your own behalf -- without being arrogant.”

Good questions include:

- What am I best known for?
- What is my firm/practice area/department best known for?
- What is my firm/practice area/department *not* known for?
- What is the best thing about my/our service?
- How can I/we improve my/our service?

Once you know the preferences of others, it is essential to respect them. “There is nothing worse than asking for feedback and then ignoring it,” said Harley. “Keep your word. Do what you say you will do.

“As the relationship progresses, remind clients and co-workers that you want their feedback, and continue to ask for it,” said Harley. “Throughout the relationship, ask ‘What am I doing that works for you?’ and ‘What can I do differently?’ Each and every time, remember to respect your promise and say ‘thank you’ for the feedback.”

Finally, keep in mind that great client and co-worker relationships are not established overnight. “It takes time and consistency – asking for feedback and acting on it -- to create the trust that leads to a candid relationship,” said Harley.

“Stop guessing what your clients and co-workers think of you and what they need from you,” said Harley. “Just ask. Make clients comfortable about providing honest and direct answers. Use that information to control your reputation and your career – and guard against almost all client defections.”