

40 Top Tips to Become a Successful Lawyer

By Attorney James P. Hentz

1. Be honest with your potential client. If your client does not have a case where he/she can have a favorable outcome, do not take the case. If you do, then you are opening up your client and yourself for unrealistic expectations that will lead to discontent. If you are honest with your client and you do not take their case when he/she thanks you says “Don’t thank me- send me a referral.” There exists an ugly stereotype surrounding attorneys. I have found that people can be very apprehensive of attorneys, they think that lawyers are dishonest, in some cases due to past experiences or “hear say”. They believe that lawyers will take their money without question. Most people believe that attorneys do not return phone calls. Be different and you will differentiate yourself from everybody else
2. Care for your client. If you care for your client, it will show and your client will like you. How do you show your client you care? See number 1. Caring for a client is something that has to come from within. If you do not care for your client it is likely you will not perform as well as you should have. Many times, your client may not recognize and appreciate what you do for them. But if you are passionate about what you do, the rewards are sure to follow. I had my first SSDI case and we won the case after my client tried twice to get SSDI herself. In an SSDI case the Federal government will pay a percentage and it has a cap. Unfortunately, I did not put on the contract “whichever is lower”; therefore, I had to bring my client in to sign a paper to get paid. My client’s husband thought I was trying to pull a “fast one.” Everything I had done was for free and if I did not win the case I would not have gotten paid. I was disappointed that in an eight months span my client thought I was not honest. Always remember to stay true to who you are
3. Give your cell phone number to your client and you will avoid getting a call from the BBO (Board of Bar Overseers). In this day and age of cell phones, email, Facebook, My Space, and Linked in, etc., you must be accessible. This generation wants to speak with you in real time and on demand. If you do not answer your phone and do not return a phone call within the same business day or weekend the potential client will call another lawyer and you will lose business. The biggest complaint to the BBO is that an attorney is not returning a phone call. You can show your client that you care by returning his or her phone call in the same day
4. Be Likeable. See number 2. One of the ways to make a connection with a potential client is being warm, friendly and ask questions about them and their family. Get to know your

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client a little first then talk about business. The client will be more at ease and it will demonstrate to them that you care. Try to add humor to the first interview; it will put both you and your client, on a friendly and even playing field, which is always a great place to begin. If you are meeting with a client, it usually means that they are in trouble and need help fast. If your client likes you, he will trust you and if he trusts you the client will hire you (and very importantly will refer you.) Remember the client is meeting you for the first time and they are nervous about giving any sum of money to an attorney to fix their problem. If they cannot see the value of your service and trust that you will do what you say then the client will not hire you. You have to engage the client and ask a lot of questions for them to open up to you

5. If you ever take a case where you do not know what you are doing and it “blows up” give your client their money back, immediately. Early on in my profession, I took an immigration case from a client and spent \$2,000 in fees. Once I realized that I had made a mistake by taking the case, I gave back the \$2,000 to my client and referred her to a new attorney. She won her case and two years later she called me and thanked me for helping her stay in this country. At the time I did know the case was beyond my abilities but I soon realized my client needed more help than I could give. It was tough giving the money back, but I avoided a malpractice claim and had a happy ex-client
6. Never take a retainer less than \$1,000 because your time and experience is worth more than that. Some cases you only need a \$1,000.00 to get the job done. In my criminal law practice, when a client has committed a crime, he or she will come to you for legal representation. Read the police report and the complaint. Then give your analysis of the strength and weakness of the government case. Refrain from saying “it is a slam dunk you will win this case at trial” First, a trial is too unpredictable to make that claim and it is unethical to guarantee a win. What you do is tell your client that based on your experience what typically happens is you plea out the case and estimate it will cost \$1,000.00. Then you can give your opinion of any motions you could file to help his/her case and an analysis of the chances of winning. Let your client make the decision. You are managing expectation. So if the case “goes south” you warned your client
7. When I take a phone call and that person on the other line asks “How much will it cost me?” I respond, by asking “Am I the first attorney you called?” Regardless of whether the answer is yes or no, my response is, “You are not shopping at Wal-Mart- you get what you pay for” Then listen to how he/she responds. Chances are he or she is “shopping around” and you would not want to do business with him/her anyway. Any client that has cost on his or her

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mind can become a big “pain in the butt.” You have to explain to the client that it is not about time, but experience and getting the job done right the 1st time

8. If you are out of the office have your office phone forward calls to your cell phone. Lawyers are always on the go and half the time you are not in your office. Therefore, it is imperative that you be available to your current clients and potential clients. It has happened on more than occasion a client has hired me because I picked up the phone. Sometimes, I was the third or fourth attorney that they called. It shows the potential client that you are accessible and want their business
9. Have your web site on your business card because people will be able to find you. In this day and age you must have a great business card and a web site. The first thing I did was to design a “killer” business card with my picture, cell phone, web site, areas of practice, fax number and e-mail address. If you do not have that on your card then you are “dead in the water.” Try to have as much of that information as possible. Set yourself apart from the crowd
10. Have your emails sent to your cell phone and then answer your emails first chance you get. This way, you will always be in contact with your clients. Attorneys spend half of their time out of their office and you need to be connected. If you are in court and you check your email you can respond right away instead of waiting to get back to your office. It is about customer service and keeping in contact with your clients
11. Return your phone messages before the end of the day. That shows your client that you care and your client will love you for it. This is another example of providing excellent service to your client. The word will get out that you respond to phone calls and emails thus you can achieve a following and break down the stereotype of the attorney that never returns phone calls
12. If your potential client calls you on the phone determine as quickly as possible if you can help him or her. If so, make an appointment as soon as you can. The longer you put off the meeting the less likely you get the new client. If you cannot make an appointment within three days you will lose this client. He or she will change their mind and find a reason to come up with the money for a retainer
13. If you can't help him then refer him to someone that can. He will thank you and remember you. If a potential client calls and I do not practice that area of law I will refer him or her to an attorney that I know. If I do not have an attorney in mind then I will refer them to the Laywer.com, Worcester Bar referral or the Massachusetts Bar referral. Be a resource to the community

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14. Sign a contract with your client so you and your client are on the same page. There will not be any misunderstandings. In my contract, I have three types of ways I can earn a fee

- The first method of payment is one with a retainer with an hourly rate and that is reserved for my private criminal matter, and private civil matters
- The second method of payment is a contingency fee agreement for my personal injury cases which is the standard rate of .33% of any settlement of a car accident case. Every attorney has the same rate for attorney
- The third method of payment is a flat rate fee which means you have a retainer for the entire process. I utilized that method for my immigration clients and my simple Wills clients. People like the flat rate because they know there is a cap for legal fees. You must know how much time and effort the particular case will take because if you estimate “too low”, you lose money, “too high” and you might not get the case. Find out the going rate so that you do not price yourself out of the market by calling other attorneys and getting a quote

15. Give a detailed invoice on the 15TH and the 30TH of the month because your client will understand where their money is going. Also, your client knows you are working on their case. Clients are very apprehensive when they give you their money and one way to eliminate that is to explain that they will get a bill on all the work that you have done and it will be documented. The bill will have the trust amount so it keeps the client in the loop. The client will not get the bill and wonder where their money went and it will cut down on unnecessary phone calls

16. Send an email, letter, phone call to your client every 30 days. See tip #6. Keeping your client informed and being proactive will cut down on unnecessary phone calls that will allow you to work on your case. If you need something that is important keep it on a two day dairy until you get the information that you requested. Always “cc” your client on all paper work that you send out. It will let your client know you are working on his/her file

17. Exceed expectations for your client. For example, “I will get your immigration paper work in 30 days” and get it done in two weeks. When a new immigration client is in the initial interview they will ask many questions but the most important one is how long will it take. Depending on the nature of the case, I would say usually six months on average. I will explain my goal is to have the paper work out the door in 30 days from the hiring interview then it will take another five months for USCIS to process the paperwork. It will take that

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long to get the paper work from your client and fill out the proper forms for USCIS. Get the paper work within 30 days

18. Have a computer program for tracking your time, billing, diary and monthly reports. After starting to get my web site done, I bought PC LAW, the software system that will track time, client, diary your court dates, print out invoices, breakdown your monthly expenses and profit for tax time. I made more money faster because of the PC LAW features. It is your practice online. If you are a solo practitioners it will save you a vast amount of time and earn you money
19. Find out where the client got your name and if it was a referral, send a thank you note! In general people like to help other people and to have more referrals, send thank you notes, it demonstrates gratitude. The other attorney or former client will appreciate your effort and send you more clients. You must track your marketing efforts so you can spend your money on marketing that works
21. During an interview, if you have something in common express it at the right time. I do a lot of immigration work, and I mention that my wife emigrated from Panama. I mention my great grandmother came from Spain
22. Put a picture of you on your business card because you will stand out. Most attorneys' business cards have name, address, work telephone number, and maybe their web site. My business card has my photograph, web site, cell number, email address, areas of practice and it has some color and that makes it stand out. You can have a 20th century business card or one for the 21 century it is up to you
23. List out the areas of practice on your business card so people will remember what areas of the law you practice. To expand on this idea most people that you meet will not remember what area of the law you practice. To overcome this gap, put your top 4 areas of practice on your card. So when a person needs your service they will look at your card and call you
24. If you are in law school and have no intentions of practicing law, rethink your strategy, you may be wasting a lot of your time and money. If you think it will help a non practice career, consider a master's degree. Law school teaches a way of thinking not a way to help your non-legal career. Law school is a lot of money, time, and effort to get your degree and not practice. I went to law school at age 32 and my single intentions was to practice law. I had a career as a claims adjuster and wanted more out of life. I love to help people and earn a living practicing law. You must love the law to become successful at it
25. Take time and experiment different areas of law and practice those ones that you love and the money will follow. The old saying goes if you love what you do then you are never

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working. Depending where you live will have an effect on what you practice. If you are on your own it is easy to determine what areas of practice you are going to do. You just have to market to where you think your clients are. If you are going to work for someone else you might have to work based on what your boss wants you to do. If that is what you have to do then do it. But I would then market in an area of practice that the firm does not do so you can develop a book of business and take the lion share of the money

26. Base your fee on the ability to pay your client and the complexity of the case. If your client wants to plead his case out on the first pretrial hearing then charge him/her \$800 dollars. If he/she wants to try the case charge him/her \$5,000.00. Give your client options about the strength of his/her case as to going to trial or pleading out his case. State the “good, bad and the ugly” when going over his or her case
27. Let your client know he has a great case to win but might never get what he wants. For instance, the cabinet installer screwed up the installation and it cost your client \$5,000.00. Tell him he can win his case but it will cost him about \$5,000. 00 to win his case. You might win the case but it could be hard in collecting the judgment. Manage the expectation
28. When someone asks you “What kind of lawyer are you? Tell them “A great one.” When they ask again, tell them “I solve legal problems at a fair and reasonable price” when they ask you what law you practice, tell them. You will always be battling the stereotype attorney. It is so important to set yourself apart from the other guys
29. Refrain from vices like over drinking, attending strip clubs, gambling, cheating on your spouse, etc., because this leads to trouble. Partaking in negative activities can lead you to thoughts of wrong doing. Never take your client’s trust money- it will lead to disbarment. The best advice that the first and only law firm that I worked for said to me was not to have the vices mentioned above or the like, because it is too tempting to spend the trust money and get disbarred
30. Never be intimate with your client- no matter how attractive the person. This tip was from my first semester of law school. It is just in bad taste and if the result is not a favorable one then it will lead to a complaint to the BBO. The client will stop paying you while you are doing the work
31. Think twice before taking a family member’s case, because they may not be happy with the outcome. It can be difficult to separate yourself- there can be a lot of emotion which will prevent you from being objective while handling the case. A family member of mine is getting a divorce but I referred the case to another qualified attorney. My family member received a discount and hired an objective attorney. Make sure you refer your family

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member to a good attorney. If the case goes “south” he/she will blame that attorney and not you. Another reason not to take a client who is a family member is because at every family function the case will come up and it will drive you crazy

32. Always get the retainer up front. This will allow you to focus your work without worrying that you will not be paid. Try to get the retainer as close as you think it will cost your client to the end of the case. This rule applies to every attorney but for a solo-practitioner, it is vital. The retainer will keep you in business
33. If you are in law school because your parents want you to be a lawyer, rethink this option. You may never be truly happy. A lawyer is not something you do, but it is what you will become. A passion for the law is the most important aspect of becoming a successful one. A passion for helping people will help your cause
34. Have a professional web person to host your web site not a family member. The website is a reflection on you and it is your branding of yourself. A one page web site will not captivate your audience. Have some creativity with your web site because it is the first thing a new client will see
35. The one case you do not take is the best one, because it would have been a malpractice case. If the client has gone through three attorneys, that is a red flag. If the client wants you to take a case on a contingency and it is not a personal injury case do not take it. If the potential client is really cost conscious he or she will be more of a pain than the fee you will earn
36. Be polite, friendly and say hello to the people that work in the clerk’s office. There is a saying “A judge can hurt you but the clerk’s office can kill you.” The clerk’s office is made up of individuals that are over worked and under paid. It is your job to make friends with them because they are very knowledgeable and dedicated to the cause and most importantly, will help you when you need the most. For example, I work as an independent contractor for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as a public defender. On days when there was not a criminal docket, I sometimes got called in to do a bail in front of the judge. I was left a message from the court to come in. I called them back and they still needed an attorney. However, I was dressed in business casual attire. I told the clerk I was out of my office and came directly to the courthouse. He explained the situation to the judge and after the hearings the judge thanked me for coming in instead of lecturing me on my business casual attire
37. Get an American Express card. It is a sign and an image of being successful

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38. Dress for success. Buy the \$500 dollar suit and the \$50 shirt with the \$30 dollar tie. I just bought a three piece suit that looks great and I stand out from the other attorneys. The shirts and ties should have some color and be fashionable. Be noticed
39. Create a Marketing Plan. Keep track of your initiatives, due dates and predecessors to each task. When you start your practice, begin by marketing little by little and increase your marketing budget with the increase in income. You may not have a lot of money when you start your practice but two things I did right away were to have a professionally done website and signing up with Lawyers.com. As you begin to earn money invest in your business because you need to spend money to make money. Keep track of where your clients are coming from so you will know where to spend your money. If a marketing campaign/ strategy you implement does not pay for itself in 6 months, move on to "plan B." Always keep marketing at the forefront of your business. Marketing does not have a completion date. It is ongoing to keep up with the changing times and demands
40. Start a self employment retirement plan and try to save 10% of your income. Save your money for retirement
41. The most important lesson to remember is to do the job right (do the right thing) and success will follow then the money will be sure to follow you wherever you go

That's it. That's all for now. I wish for you the very best in all that you do. May you have all the success the world has to offer.

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