

Popular Threads on Solosez

Time-Leeching Clients

How do you control a time-leeching client? I have a flat fee client who routinely calls me and stays on the phone for 30 minutes to an hour?

I know this is my job to "control" the client, but I have no idea what to say.

When I do a flat fee or (more likely) an estimate, I try to be as clear as possible about the scope that the fee or estimate includes, and also indicate what it doesn't include. Excessive phone calls from the client, although worded differently, would fall into the "not included" category.

Failing that, you can always just tell the client that your fee includes the "normal" time to perform the given task, and the time spent on phone conversations is taking you away from not only that work but also other paying work and if it continues you'll have no choice but to bill for the time, since it was not included in the fee you quoted him/her.

Jeremy T. Vermilyea, Oregon

This is one of the minor reasons I do no family law. But, I do have a client who likes to do what you describe only on the weekends (emotional issues, I think...). So I stopped answering my phone on the weekends, at least for that client -- I return that call on Monday. My other clients do not abuse my weekends, so I may answer the phone if they call on weekends. Otherwise, for the total weekday time suck, decide in advance how long you will spend on the phone with this person, then have "someplace you've gotta be" at x time - even if, in your mind, that place is really at your desk doing your work. Good luck,

Jennifer N. Weil, New Jersey

I stick them back on the clock. I make sure the client understands that our arrangement can be rearranged if he/she/it takes advantage.

Trippe S. Fried, Washington, DC

I have never tried this but one solution to the weekend client would be to tell them in advance that weekend calls are at a higher rate.

Edwin Dougherty, Ohio

I use a similar tactic as the "I have some place I have to go" by saying that there is someone in my office or standing at my door... of course, it helps that I have people that come and go from my office, even only the staff here at the firm, all the time. I end up working late because some times it is the only time I get uninterrupted time to work.

Kimberly DeCarrera

My two main practice areas are personal injury and family law. There are some clients in each area who take up more time than their case is worth. The (hourly) family law clients become strangely quiet once they get their first bill showing the time they talk to me; the (contingency) PI clients learn pretty soon to either send an email or be prepared to leave a voicemail message.

Russ D. Gray, Utah

I do flat fee cases most of the time. I am responsive, but when it begins to be excessive they can get used to voice mail or email. If the VM is not detailed--ie just wanted to check in on my case---then, I have legal assistant call back and ask them what is it in reference. They start getting hint after that. Bottom line--after a while, you have to stop answering. I know it's hard at beginning, but clients can become abusive if you let them.

Doris Galindo, Florida

Keep a clock timer by the telephone, and when the client calls, set it for five minutes. When it goes off, tell her that you have another call.

You may want to think about your flat fee agreement, and add language for extra fees for time-wasting phone calls.

Lynn Sherrell, California

Great book for such issues:

<http://www.amazon.com/No-B-S-Time-Management-Entrepreneurs/dp/1932156852>

Daniel M. Mills, Washington, D.C.

There are several things you can do.

1. You can limit the time periods when you accept calls. For example, have your assistant tell clients that you will return calls at 11:00 a.m. or 4:00 p.m., or whenever you want. The point is to not interrupt your work and take their calls just any time they call. If you don't have an assistant, include the schedule to return calls on your voice mail.
2. Have your assistant push to get a message and then return the call (with a brief message from you), explaining that you are tied up but you knew it was important for the client's question to be answered.
3. Every time you talk with that client, start by explaining that you only have 3 or 4 minutes to answer a quick question, and then get off the phone on time. The client will learn.
4. Tell the client you appreciate their information, but it would really help you out if they could put it in writing for you so you can keep it in the file.
5. When the client calls, find a job for the client to do to help the case -- gather records, organize things, gather information for discovery. Try to keep the client occupied.
6. Screen your clients better. Over time, you may be able to pick out key phrases, such as "It's a matter of principle." Or "The cost doesn't matter." Don't accept those clients.

7. Revise your flat fee agreement to limit the phone calls or to give you the right to do a "change order" if the case involves actions beyond certain specified ones, including a number of phone calls or office visits per month. The change order would be a fee increase.
8. In your initial interview, explain that handling the case on a flat fee basis is possible if certain boundaries are respected: the hours during which you will accept calls, the length of calls, # of office visits, etc. Make it clear that you must abide by them. Explain to the client that you are not available 24/7 (unless you really want to be). You should be able to handle their case in regular office hours.
9. Remember, you don't have to take every P.C. who calls and you have the right to control your own time. If the relationship doesn't work, withdraw. If the client won't cooperate with your reasonable rules of operation, there's a conflict between you and the client and that's a basis for you to withdraw.

Good luck. --Dick Price

Richard C. Price, Texas