

Time Management and Setting Boundaries for Pushy People

Ok, I admit to being cranky, tired and stressed. But how do you set boundaries with people without alienating them or wasting energy by engaging in a full blown battle.

I seem to attract people who do not care what else I have to do when they want something from me they want it NOW.

An acquaintance called late Friday night, she wanted an amharic speaking lawyer referral in Oregon for her sister. I made some inquiries, but no-one responded. Sunday morning she called 18 times before leaving a message that I was irresponsible because she gave me 24 hours to find her a lawyer. I give her a contact Sunday night. She called me back multiple times on Monday because she did not like the fee and retainer that the lawyer quoted her. She accused me of alot of unethical things which annoyed me.

Last night, a law school colleague texted and asked for help with a probate case in Maryland, I am not licensed in Maryland and told him no. He asked for referrals. I told him I would help, but I was in bed then. He started calling at noon today, back to back and sending multiple texts for a referral asap.

I was aggravated because I never refer colleagues' without their permission and had not even had a chance to make inquiries. Plus, he is a Maryland licensed attorney and should know other lawyers he could ask for help.

I have 5 or 6 people who do this to me daily. Someone left multiple texts and voicemails today because they want information on a D.C Superior Court lawyer panel. None of them are putting directly putting money in my pocket. But, they want what they want NOW from me. How dare I have other stuff to do.

Some people call back to back until my voicemail fills up or I reply. I never give my cell out. Most people have my number because they are in my circle and it's easy to obtain and/or they never aggravated me before. I have made the mistake of returning calls from my cell.

I call or text people once

I know my email comes off as whiny, but I am just really aggravated today. Still not finished with work! So any suggestions on how to deflect pushy people without alienating or ruining my good mood?

It sounds to me like you need to just start telling these people no. That sounds harsh, but good grief! They aren't respecting you or your time at all. You are doing them a favor FOR FREE! I had a blow out with a potential client once because she was being really pushy about setting up her first appointment. I happened to get really sick at the same time. I had to reschedule the appointment twice and she starting emailing and texting and calling constantly. I finally had to let her know in no uncertain terms that I would not be able to take her case period. Good grief....if this was how she was going to act when I was sick, I couldn't imagine how she would act when I was better. So, I nipped it in the bud.

I think when someone makes these requests of you, you have to just start saying things like "I don't know anyone else. I'm sorry. You should call the lawyer referral service in that state." Or something similar. And, frankly, I would screen my calls a lot more stringently. It's a fine line between wanting to be able to help people and be available for them and people just being total jerks and taking advantage of you. Sounds like most of the people you've been dealing with fall into the latter category!

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Thank you,

Letisha Luecking Orlet, Illinois

Not a whiny email at all -- we all have to deal with this type of thing on a daily basis. It's the nature of the beast, so to speak. My advice would be to tell them in your first response "I'll look into it and see if I can come up with anything. I'll let you know if I do. I'm pretty swamped right now, so it might take me a few [days/weeks/etc] to get back to you."

That way, when they start blowing up your phone or email, you'll have a perfectly legitimate out for why you haven't been able to help them yet. This flips the script and instead of making you out to be the demon for not having answers while making them look like the ass for being pushy.

Seth Combs, Kentucky

I guess I just have a higher tolerance for blowing people off. I would have severed ties immediately with person 1 after the 18 calls. That doesn't fly with me. With person 2, I would have explained that you were looking into it, but that you also have a practice. I would think a colleague would get the message that you need to eat before you can make sure the rest of the world gets fed.

I tend to view the people in my life as either beneficial or detrimental. I try to keep as many beneficial people around and as few detrimental ones as possible.

Dan Gerber, Illinois

I like Seth's response. Or if you add, 'How soon do you need the information because that will tell me if I can help at all?'

As aside, I've always wondered with the 'legalzoom', 'do it yourself', 'you can find it online' age if more and more people devalue our services. Coupled with the fact that I am convinced that people think we know ever lawyer on the planet OR 'no matter how complicated the question', we can provide a quick answer. Maybe it's more of a 'self gratification' or entitlement mentality.

In any event, Sonya, I share your pain. I routinely get calls or e-mails from people attempting to do what you do.

This may sound 'off' or (in my words) "stank" or 'trifling', but put people

who call you for free, ask yourself 3 questions:

- 1) Are they a potential client?
- 2) Are they a potential referral source or referral fee?
- 3) Are they friend?

If the answer is 'NO' to all of these, become a champion of the 'one sentence' response.

Q: I need this _____ type of attorney.

A: Sorry, don't know anyone like that

Q: I need someone who does is?

A: Contact your state bar. They can help.

Q: Will you tell me someone who does this?

A: I know one person but if they can't help you, there is nothing else I can do.

Again, there are many more 'sage' and 'wise' attorneys on this list serve so I'm sure you will get some great feedback. My marketing consultant said it to me "If the person calling you on the phone or e-mailing you for help is not putting you in the position to make money for your firm, you are under no obligation to help".

Anthony Reeves, Florida

To Dan's point about detrimental and beneficial people. Nothing good will ever come of maintaining a relationship with someone who calls you 18 times

on a Sunday morning. Not a clinician but that's one of my markers for a personality disorder. Cut 'em loose.

John Leonard, Connecticut

Timely post on LinkedIn today re: same. See:

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/best-advice-dont-feed-barking-dogs-maynard-webb>

Basically, stop rewarding them for their behavior. But then, you knew that. ;-)

Nancy Duhon, Georgia

It comes down to client control and expectations, Establish those at intake and never have the problems you describe. Client should know they are lucky you took the matter.

John Page, Florida

I feel your pain. How about something like, "I would really love to help you but I am in the middle of a major case. I should have time to help you with that in March (or whatever). If you are still seeking assistance at that point please feel free to get back in touch with me on this."

Michelle Kainen, Vermont

What startles me is that you say you have 5 or 6 people who do this to you daily, and that the 2 you specifically mention are not clients but "an acquaintance" and "a law school colleague". So this is not an issue of client management, or practicing in a field that spawns obsessive behavior by clients (hello, family law).

What also startles me is that I don't believe I have ever dealt with a single person like you describe in my 51 years of life and almost 30 years as a lawyer (and I'm a NY litigator, so it's not like I don't have the opportunity to meet a**holes). I don't recall a single person ever being that rude or demanding on a sustained basis. So to have 5 or 6 people do this to you daily is unbelievably outrageous.

I think you have to look at what it is about you, or your friends, or your life, that connects you to so many acquaintances or colleagues that are a**holes. It reminds me of the stories one hears, perhaps apocryphal, about the person complaining that his/her last 5 boyfriends/girlfriends cheated on him/her. It's either astounding run of bad luck, or the person is picking people who are predisposed to that. So maybe you are somehow choosing to surround yourself with pushy, demanding asses. Maybe it's friends, relatives, neighbors. But if it's as constant and routine as you say, then I don't think you can chalk it up to random chance, or something simple that you're saying or not saying. There's something that is causing a remarkable overabundance of these people in your life.

Patrick W. Begos, Connecticut

When people are out-of-bounds on behavior, I call them on it. In the first instance I would state that I am no longer available to assist, probably right after the first series of calls. You are already being treated poorly, so this person is not a source of business or referrals. The colleague for sure is someone who does not understand boundaries and should. The starting issue for me is that neither of these individuals would know my cell phone number.

I tell everyone I check my email two or three times a day. I need space to work on solving their inquiry or to work on something else. My calls are also screened at the office. It is the only way I can get anything done.

You cannot be nice to everyone all the time, especially when they are not. I will try to respond with less and less tact to someone who is unreasonable. Eventually I get blunt, but catch me on the wrong day and I may bluntly tell someone to go away and not contact me again.

Respect yourself, set your boundaries, and be firm in maintaining them.

Darrell G. Stewart, Texas

Thanks for all of your responses. The article was timely and helpful. I am a work in progress. I admit that.

People over-stepping their boundaries and making outrageous demands of me is an issue I have struggled with all my life. My sister says it's because I REALLY listen to people and most people don't get that. Plus, some people assume I am nicer than what I am and 'I won't mind' if they do certain things. But I do mind.

Every year at Xmas or vacation time, I lose 'friends' because they try to call me during those times and I am usually unavailable. The thing is the people I consider my true friends, I sometimes don't talk to for months at a time.

Typically, I ignore little slights and then 'explode' when they continue. I have definitely said some things out of anger that I regretted later. Which has caused some relationships to be ruined. So I am trying to think before I speak and to choose my words carefully.

The first person was my sorority sister and friend. I really wanted to help her. She has been very kind to me in the past. But she hurt my feelings and was being unreasonable. I did put out some feelers and people did start responding the next few business days. But I can't control when people will respond to me. Nor do I want too. So I am going to take a break from her.

The second person is not my friend and has refused to provide assistance to me in the past when I requested it. We rarely communicate with each other. So cutting ties with him will not be difficult.

Thanks for your responses. They really helped. I feel better today. I slept well last night. Sleep always makes me feel better and being able to vent was beneficial.

"What startles me is that you say you have 5 or 6 people who do this to you daily, and that the 2 you specifically mention are not clients but "an acquaintance" and "a law school colleague"."

Exactly, PB!!!

Why does anyone on this list think that if Sonya says, "Hey, Friend, I've got a practice to run. I'll try and help you but, golly-gee, things sure are busy here. Why I feel just like a honeybee in a mess of dandelions!?" These nutjobs are calling and texting Sonya until they get her attention. The only people I have ever had do that to me were under the age of two at the time---and it only worked that first time. These are people who have no sense of social boundaries or decency and they really don't give a whit how busy Sonya is.

Sonya, ignore these people. They are NOT going to send the BIG case one day (in fact, if they ever get a big case to refer out, they will send it to a big firm and tell you that it was just TOO important of a case for a solo.) I realize that part of what you do is "being a connector" but you have to draw the line on people taking up toooooo much of your bandwidth or otherwise you won't be tuned in when the real call tries to get through.

They You Go, Now You Know.

Jimmy Mac

(This message may have been dictated while driving and may contain misspellings, non-sequiturs, and/or inappropriate language.)

James M. McMullan, Alabama

Getting comfortable with you does not equate with 20 calls or texts in a day demanding you take action in doing a favor. I can't imagine a single friend, relative, neighbor or colleague of mine doing that. I have met a number of dysfunctional people, but no one like that.

The people you are dealing with have serious problems. Nothing you do is causing those problems. But something you do may be attracting these problem people to you.

Patrick W. Begos

I am very friendly, kind and polite. 80 percent of people I meet appreciate that and don't try to abuse it. 20 % of the people I met will try to abuse it.

So people overstepping their boundaries is nothing new to me. But thence often than not, I meet people who are incredibly generous and kind to me. I would not be able to practice law if so many people did not help me. I am serious. EVERYTIME, I enter D.C Superior Court, someone there is extraordinarily kind to me. I don't think it's an accident.

I work really hard to attract positive energy and I learned at an early age if people like you, they will help you. So I am not changing who I am, but rather my response when people try to bully me.

Thanks so much for the feedback. I feel a lot better.

With warm regards,
