

10 Ways to Boost Your Legal Expertise for Optimal Client Service

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Tim Perry
Director, Practical Law,
Asia and Emerging Markets

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Optimising client service delivery is essential for law firms looking to expand their share of their clients' 'legal spend. One way to approach this is to boost the legal expertise of lawyers at the firm.

Subject matter experts at Thomson Reuters and a law firm customer explored steps to achieving just that in a recent panel discussion. The following guide unpacks the insights from their conversation, addressing how lawyers can serve clients with deeper legal knowledge.

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Improve client responsiveness with deeper insights

Accessibility and responsiveness are pillars of law firm client service, says Christina Sochacki, Senior Associate within the corporate and commercial practice and the healthcare and life sciences sector group lead for the UAE and KSA at MENA law firm Al Tamimi & Company.

"Something we always stress at our firm is to respond to your client's email within 24 hours, regardless of how busy you are," she says. This is important even if it is only to confirm receipt. "Acknowledging to a client that their email has been received and giving them a realistic timeframe for a fuller response lets them know that their concerns are in your hands."

While being there for urgent client calls is expected, as a law firm adviser, you need to get the balance right to avoid burnout. It's important to set boundaries to ensure your accessibility is not taken too far at the cost of your wellbeing

"It helps you to better manage your agenda as well," reflects Christina, "as clients will then let you know if something requires more urgent attention than your proposed turnaround time".

“ The responsiveness piece taps into the deep expertise you need as a lawyer. This requires you to have quick access to the most current legislation and know-how so that you can give a meaningful initial response to a client query. ”

Technology solutions, such as Practical Law and Westlaw, can enable you to retrieve legislative facts faster and, therefore, to improve client responsiveness.

"Expertise really matters," comments Sophie Cameron, Senior Director at Practical Law.

Also important is having good document and matter management systems in place so that, when clients call about their matters, you can access their files and respond while speaking with them.

Extending your legal expertise into other practice areas

Clients increasingly ask their trusted legal advisors to assist them with matters outside of the law firm's core areas of expertise or covered jurisdictions.

"Identifying ways to meet these requests can create opportunities to grow the relationship with the client and strengthen the foundation of trust," says Sara Catley, Senior Director at Practical Law.

Having a holistic understanding of the client's business is key to project managing a matter across several practice areas and jurisdictions, says Sara. It can help to prevent the challenges that clients often experience of coordinating legal advice from several law firms on a multi-jurisdictional matter.

"A frustration for clients that get piecemeal legal advice from a number of different sources can be that it is really difficult to see the whole picture," reflects Sara.

Al Tamimi is an example of a firm that has built its reputation as a go-to trusted advisor for clients with multi-jurisdictional and multi-sectoral legal project management needs. If it does not have a presence in certain jurisdictions, it will obtain quotes from local law firms with the necessary expertise, collate the advice, and present it in line with the client's known expectations.

"We will manage that advice and ensure it makes sense and is up to the client's standards before integrating it with our own advice," comments Christina. "We will then put it all together in a neat, complete packaged advice, which can be used more easily by clients."



Sara Catley

Senior Director Practical Law,
Thomson Reuters



James Jarvis

Vice President, Legal Solutions,
Thomson Reuters Asia & Emerging Markets

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Shift the burden from the user to the technology

Substantial efficiency gains can be achieved by transferring time-consuming manual tasks to technology. The key is to ensure that the technology you deploy is designed with the user in mind and helps your lawyers to more efficiently deliver client services.

"It's very important when you're looking at any solutions that you understand how you want to work," says Sophie Cameron, Senior Director at Practical Law. "The tech needs to do more of the work for you."

For her, design thinking is critical when thinking about shifting the burden of work to technology and enabling users to access internal know-how at the point of need.

"At law firms, this can mean making sure that they can retrieve data in a single application. For example, combining searches, making sure know-how isn't hidden away in individual practice area folders, and ensuring information is accessible across the network."

Technology can have a radical impact on how innovative law firms are and how well they can support clients.

“It is incredibly valuable to shift the burden of resource-intensive work to technology,” comments Sara. “This can free up lawyer time to think strategically, work smarter and grow client relationships.”

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Gather the right legal research materials for clients seamlessly

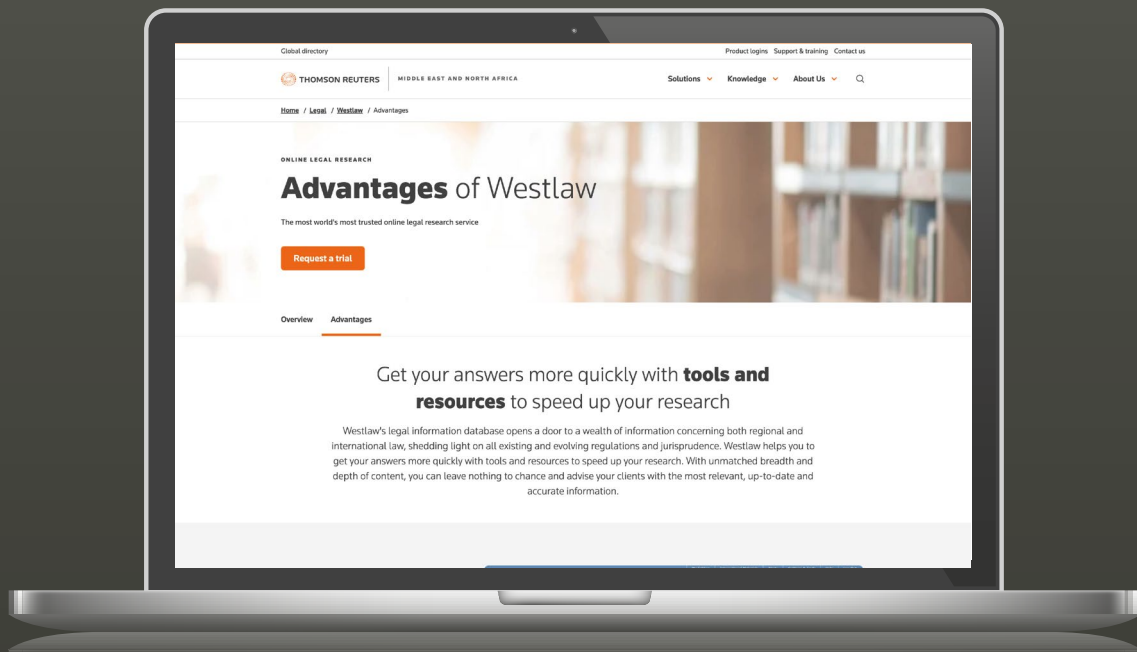
A key way to boost legal expertise and optimise client delivery is to ensure your firm has access to resources that enable your lawyers to seamlessly gather the right legislative materials for clients.

Research tools that provide access to relevant and reliable information is especially important in the MENA region.

"It's not the same as practising law in the US or the UK, for example, where all legislation and governmental decisions are fully published in English and accessible to everyone very promptly in a manner which is easily discoverable," comments Christina.

"So, we do have an added burden here, an added analysis needed, to be sure that we have all the latest information, including about how a law is implemented in practice."

Her law firm uses Westlaw to keep abreast of authorities' intentions and expectations about how to implement evolving regulatory requirements. This is particularly important when dealing with English translations of legislation or governmental guidance documents, notes Christina, as sometimes additional information is needed to understand the context of certain rules.



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Know when your legal research is complete

Conducting thorough legal research is a challenge to manage through free desktop research alone, particularly when relying on traditional search engines or physical libraries. It's difficult to determine when legal research is complete.

Christina has found that a comprehensive research approach is necessary to ensure her team is identifying and addressing all potential issues affecting clients. "You need to keep drilling down and asking yourself if your research is complete," she says.

“ It’s not enough to do a Google search for relevant legislation. You need a partner, such as Westlaw, to support your internal knowledge management system. ”

"I use the word 'partner' because it really works both ways. When I discover things, I'll share it with Westlaw. Equally, Westlaw will discover things that weren't easily accessible and will share it with us."

For Christina, this focus on following the research is key to delivering optimal client services. She has found that Westlaw's research tools enable her to more speedily identify legislation and regulatory guidance that may be connected to a client matter.

"One of my little tricks when it's hard to identify the 'known unknowns' for clients is to find and read all the legal references that Westlaw typically provides for each piece of legislation," she says.

Cultivate your own client service style

In its recent annual survey, the Thomson Reuters Market Insights team examined the qualities that drove more than 6,000 senior legal counsel to rate their law firm advisers more highly, with a third of these based in the Asia-Pacific. The data revealed subtle shifts in what clients are focused on when they're evaluating which law firms to choose.

Innovation was one of seven factors that influenced general counsel's purchasing behaviour, with innovative law firms experiencing a spike in their GC preferential rating of 32%.

Among the other qualities the market research identified are for your firm to possess brand affinity, offer clients stand-out lawyers and enable continuous client feedback and collaboration with them.

"For corporate counsel rating their law firm advisors, innovation is a big-ticket aspect of what they are looking for from their firms," comments Sara. "This could be around the technologies they use to engage with clients, their agile ways of working or their alternative billing arrangements."

With corporate counsel experiencing tight budgets for external legal spend, law firms are under mounting pressure to demonstrate value to their clients. Many private practice lawyers have found that they are better able to leverage their legal skills and meet client needs by using legal research tools such as Westlaw and Practical Law.

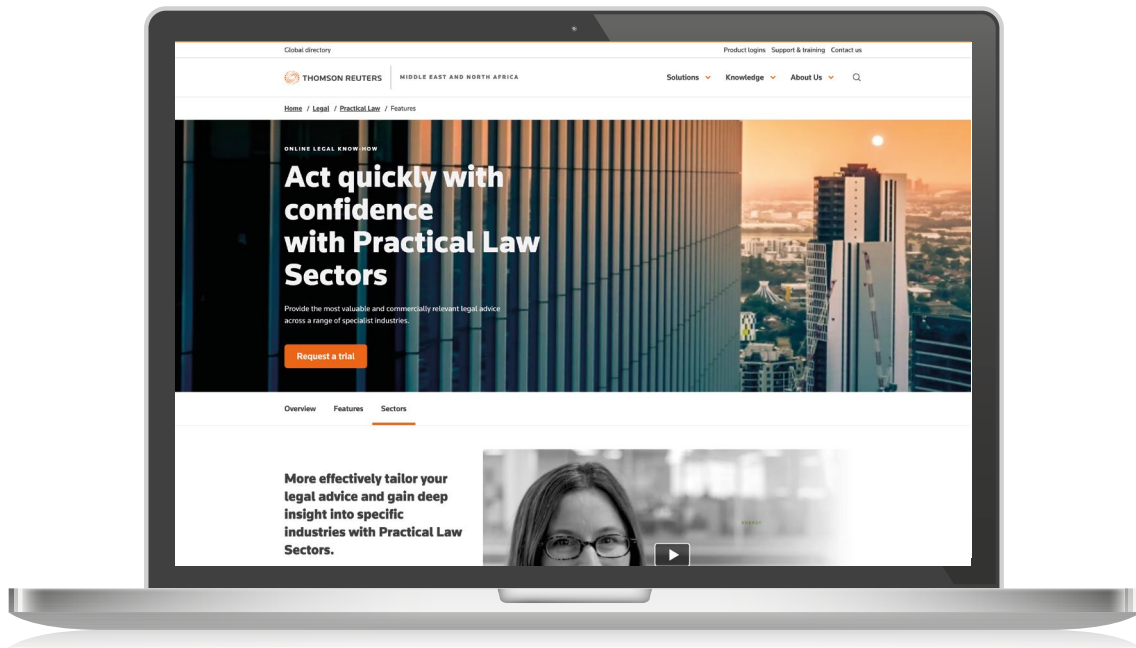
"It's about looking at the quality of the engagement, not just the speed and frequency of responding and delivering to clients," says Sophie. "Do you have the right resources at your fingertips to help you formulate your responses?"



Christina Sochacki

Senior Associate Corporate Commercial,
Al Tamimi & Company





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Collaborate to improve your client service

How well must lawyers in law firms collaborate, both internally and with their clients? For Christina's firm, it's a major consideration.

For her, the key is to take a sector-based approach to client work, rather than a practice area-based approach. This involves keeping up to date on clients' activities and major developments in their sector. It also involves proactive collaboration to ensure you identify and address the potential legislative implications of seemingly innocuous client instructions.

She gives the recent example of a multinational pharmaceutical business that asked for advice on the local tax implications of a new business model. The tax team asked her to join the call in case there were wider healthcare regulation implications, which proved to be the case in two jurisdictions in which the company operates.

"On that call, we started addressing issues that were much wider than the client even knew they had. At that point, the client said 'can we make this not only a tax advice but also a regulatory advice, and can you get on the phone now with our business team?'"

A small scope of work can become a larger scope of work and also solidify to clients that they've come to the right place if you consider all potential angles of business decisions," reflects Christina.

"It's a win-win for everyone."

Differentiate your offering

Number two on the Thomson Reuters Market Insight's list of law firm favourability drivers after an innovative approach is the notion of brand affinity. Although this attribute can be difficult to measure, says Sara, a corporate client's sense of connection to a law firm's brand can impact how highly they rate you as their legal adviser.

A law firm's appeal and recognition can be partly driven by its communications and marketing activities, remarks Sara. "It can also be driven internally by the culture of the firm and how actively you are promoting the culture you use to service clients."

At Al Tamimi & Company, a "small army" of people are dedicated to managing the firm's branding and client touchpoints, says Christina. The firm also has innovation teams dedicated to ensuring the firm stays "ahead of the curve in terms of technology and the service delivery given to clients". Quality control committees are also "constantly analysing how to improve the quality and delivery of our services," she adds.

A key way that individual lawyers can differentiate their offering is by giving clients practical sector-based advice rather than black-letter law advice focused on a single practice area.

"When you get involved in the dynamics of a sector, you get involved in the dynamics of the client's business," comments Christina. "It makes your practice much more interesting. It allows you to have a deeper level of conversation and communication with the clients, which can create stronger bonds."



Tim Pollard
Senior Manager,
Primary Law

Ask for genuine client feedback and be responsive in return

As clients become more involved in their matters, they want their voices to be heard. For the relationship with their law firm to grow, they require a candid right of reply.

The reward for meeting this need is aptly demonstrated by the Thomson Reuters Market Insights survey results. Those in-house lawyers whose external counsel engaged them in formal feedback in the past 12 months had higher satisfaction rates than those who didn't.

The moral of the story is to ask clients what they want and how the relationship is going — they want to help you do better.

"You want to know early on in the relationship or matter if things are not necessarily going according to plan or if your advice is not landing as well as it could," comments Sophie.

As part of this process, she says, it is important to consider whether existing processes allow for genuine client feedback and responsiveness. "Do you have overly formalised feedback processes? Do you only ask for feedback at the end of the matter? Or do you regularly seek feedback, both formal and informal, during a matter?"

It is also critical to consider how you internalise client feedback, Sophie says, to ensure it is well received internally, learned from, and acted upon in future service delivery.

"Thinking through your client service delivery and how that impacts on points of contact with different parts and levels of the firm is very important."

Carl Olson

Vice President,
Proposition &
Client Relationship
Management

Be a stand-out lawyer

Corporate clients are demanding more from their legal advisers. Not only are private practice lawyers expected to have exceptional technical expertise, but they also need to add commercial and strategic value to clients' businesses. That 'X Factor' that makes them stand out and above their competitors.

"What really sets you apart in the market is how well you're able to understand your client's business, understand their commercial objectives, and embody their values in the way that you provide your legal advice and services," says Sara. "It's about being a trusted adviser across all aspects of work."

To reach that status, you need to invest time in getting to know your client, its business and the industry in which it operates. There's a large piece of non-legal expertise that you need to develop. "I think going deep in developing that understanding is what marks out standout lawyers," comments Sophie.

To do it properly you need to equip yourself with several sources of information and ensure you're accessing legal information in an efficient and effective way. Lawyers require information that helps them to stay abreast of industry trends and know what's happening in the market.

Having access to the latest information through legal research tools such as Practical Law or Westlaw can help you stay on top of legislative developments and be seen as a stand-out lawyer. Christina points to the example of being contacted out of the blue by an MNC that wanted advice on the impact of new legislation in Saudi Arabia after reading an article she had written on the topic.

"Sometimes it's something as simple as that, which can make a difference, because if you're taking the time to stay on top of new legislation and write about it, the client sees you as the expert on it."



Nadim Al Jisr

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