

A photograph of a person rock climbing on a large, overhanging rock face. The climber is wearing a yellow top and dark shorts, and is seen from the back, reaching up to a ledge. The sky is a mix of blue and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

Why “Independent” Client Listening Works Best. How to become one of the “smartest” and keep the momentum going.¹

By [Allan Carton](#), Director, [Inpractice UK](#)

“For the smartest firms the opportunities are waiting to be seized, but it will take a dynamic and questioning mindset and an ability to look at the business from the client’s point of view, to be consistently successful.” (The Age of the Client – LexisNexis Bellwether Report)

Focus Initiatives on whatever clients value – make it tangible.

Law firms should combine *independent* “client listening” with other relationship, account and business development activities as all have a part to play.

We use independent client listening at the front end of most projects, to get a perspective for our clients - from theirs - about what they would value as tangible outcomes for them of the initiative we are about to work on. It helps dramatically to inform the project and the results our clients want to see from it.

Bear in mind that all our key areas of work have a direct impact on clients, so this is very pertinent. All are aimed directly at adding value to our legal clients’ services – revolve primarily around technology, client relationships (from CRM strategies and systems, through research and systems), process improvement (including “lean”) and development of the skills needed to make the most of these enhancements to the capability of the practice.

Client listening can be used in many different contexts, some of which we outlined in the first article, but overall it:

- Is not rocket science
- Explores the personal and business objectives and priorities of the client; their world.
- Is personal, to actively engage with clients, meaningfully about their views and plans.
- Recognises that people run your client’s business and that they don’t all think the same
- Makes clients feel valued and involved
- Identifies some trends for groups of clients and sectors
- Enables your practice to make decisions based on client preferences and strategic needs
- Takes the guesswork and navel-gazing out of how to deliver legal services
- Brings people closer, creates creative thinking time and positive debate.

¹ This is part 2 of a 3-part series of short articles, we explain how law firms are using "independent client listening" to generate new business, strengthen ties with clients (referrers and business partners too); to develop new service propositions valued more by clients, innovate on service delivery and develop a client-focused culture across the business. It helps lawyers to find tangible new ways to differentiate from competitors and future-proof relationships with clients.

- Results in action
- Generates new business.
- Enables lawyers to innovate with confidence

The best results are produced from one-to-one, face-to-face interviews and we are reluctant to carry out any relatively small scale initiative in any other way. As the numbers rise, it makes more sense to incorporate some other forms of listening; perhaps telephone calls or Skype for one-to-ones at a distance, but interaction is essential. Focus groups can be very productive too in the right situation, but can be expensive and challenging to coordinate for the right mix of people.

Listening Looks Forwards – Not Backwards

Client Listening is not about “client satisfaction” related initiatives, which have a big part to play too and are much more prevalent in the legal sector. They tend to look backwards at what service has been like, asking “how are we doing, what could we do better?”.

Client listening looks forwards to what the relationship and services should look like in the future asking “What can we do differently ... to give you more value from our relationship and the services we deliver for you?”. Everything should be up for discussion - no holds barred. The past has got you this far, to establish the relationship, but expectations and possibilities have changed radically.

Independent Listening Produces Better Results

Independent Client Listening involves the introduction of an experienced, objective view to add a new dynamic and a different perspective. Our experience has shown that this involvement very often opens up new, totally unexpected, opportunities that would not otherwise have been identified.

Why this works so well, so often?

- The business people we talk to have generally **never experienced this kind of investment and interest in a relationship with them from a law firm** before. They recognise it as exceptional now. Perhaps it wouldn't have the same impact if all firms did it.
- Being independent, **we can talk candidly and very directly about their personal and business objectives**. We can explore the concerns that could generally keep them awake at night to find out about them and their business world, setting specific legal services aside for good parts of the discussion. Experience tells us where to draw the line.
- **We assure them of confidentiality** in any areas they don't want attributed to them. In practice, it is rare for clients to exercise this right to anonymity, but it lets them talk without any inhibition or reservations.
- **We explore options; what might be possible** – we don't agree any actions, making that clear to the person we interview. It is agreed that we take their comments “back to base” for the law firm to chew over and come up with any proposals from there, with a clearer understanding of what the client wants to achieve.
- We make it clear that we really don't know anything about the detail of past transactions, which means **we don't get bogged down in that detail**. We are only interested in looking at how the relationship and services should develop going forwards.

- In that context, we can use our wide experience of the market for legal services and our research into their sector to identify (alongside our client's views on untapped opportunities) to **open discussion on their view of the legal service they want in the future. What could that look like for them?**
- We explore options from all angles, with our **experience of technology, process, relationships, skills** etc; asking any questions we want because there are no boundaries to this discussion on either side. Anything could be possible.
- **Talk about what other firms do and DON'T do** – for real
- Allow them to **explore freely, without the restraints of the current relationship;**

You will find that Independent Client Listening can be used very effectively in a wide variety of situations to help develop your business. It should be a resource that every firm should use one way or another as a matter of routine.

[Also see - PART 1: Why Smart Firms Listen to Clients](#)

[Coming soon - PART 3: Getting Started: How Independent Client Listening Works Inpractice.](#)

For more information or to discuss how this could work for your practice - in confidence and with no obligation - contact Allan Carton on 07779 653105 or at acarton@inpractice.co.uk

www.inpractice.co.uk