

Waiting for a good reception

By Susan Van Dyke

You're nervously waiting for an important potential client to arrive at your office. You've spent months, perhaps a year, hoping for this day. The prospect steps off the elevator and strides into your reception area for the first time. Within five seconds an irrevocable impression is sealed.

What if the reception area looked up to date, stylishly confident, comfortable and welcoming? And the receptionist smiled at your prospect and said "Good morning Mr. Hunter, Mr. Tyson is looking forward to seeing you. I'll call him now and let him know you've arrived and then I'll hang your coat and offer you something to drink. Please feel free to have a seat; I'll be right with you."

Reception is a window to the firm. Provide every single visitor with the same great view. A good receptionist will juggle multiple tasks, but most importantly, greet visitors with genuine warm and polished hospitality. Chatting with a waiting visitor while cheerfully answering the phone, signing for couriers, rebooking boardrooms and directing the lunch caterer are done simultaneously. Like any good host, they appear to be enjoying themselves.

Surpass client expectations by paying attention to details. How visitors *feel* will impact their impression of your firm. Make it a point to ensure the visitor feels important and valued. When a lawyer is running late the receptionist and secretary can help. Update visitors every 5 or 10 minutes after the meeting time has lapsed. Let them know: Have you reached the secretary? Has the person your visitor is meeting with returned from lunch? Are they wrapping up a call?

A wait beyond 15 minutes necessitates the secretary's personal appearance to introduce herself, explain the delay, estimate the further wait and settle the visitor into a boardroom if one is available. Demonstrate how to use the telephone and offer a pen and paper. Go back every five minutes.

Done right, this "distraction by hospitality" approach will, in many instances, supersede the annoying delay. As the wait (or irritation level) increases, so should your fuss-factor. But judge each person individually.

Great receptionists are difficult to find. "Receptionist positions are among the toughest staff positions to fill," according to Sandra Miles, President and CEO of the Miles Employment Group. "They are not well paid, yet firms need someone who is polished,

professional and client-oriented. The tendency is to hire receptionists who see the position as a stepping stone.

Some of the best receptionists are from the tourism or hospitality sector – even retail experience is good – these are people who understand client service.”

Receptionists saddled with heavy administrative work push visitors’ needs to second place. Sandra Miles agrees, “It’s a common thread to throw too much on the receptionists – it detracts from client service. And sensitive information should not be on receptionists’ desks.”

A well-trained receptionist who sports a great attitude can do wonders for your relationship with clients and prospects.

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The top 10 fool-proof ways of wowing clients at reception:

1. Greet visitors by name and alert Receptionists to VIP new visitors
2. Keep the reception area tidy
3. Prebook boardrooms
4. Hang coats and rescue dripping umbrellas
5. Offer coffee/tea/water/juice (even if you have to build a refreshment station nearby) and serve in china or a quality glass
6. Update visitors regularly on the status of their meeting
7. While waiting, introduce other firm members who are relevant to the prospect or client
8. Keep a stash of clean quality toys in the event kids are in tow
9. If the delay is excessive, order breakfast or lunch for the client or prospect
10. Smile and use a friendly tone of voice