

**I** KNOW WHY SO MANY PEOPLE TELL LAWYER JOKES.

I have made phone calls to other attorneys who represent my clients, opposing counsel, and lawyers for family members. My calls have been put on hold and sometimes never returned, and I have waited weeks or months for infor-

mation or materials promised—and needed—immediately. I have been treated discourteously. The assistant for one attorney laughed heartily when I asked to leave a message on her boss's voice mail. She explained that his voice mailbox is always full, and that he never checks there anyway. In short, I have experienced customer service that would likely shut down businesses in other industries, and likely should in ours as well. As a profession, if we want the right to complain about lawyer jokes, we should probably stop providing the fodder for them.

In 1994, when I left my well-paying associate position at Heller Ehrman's litigation department to join a relatively new boutique representing public agencies, the focus of my practice changed to education. The work here at Lozano Smith is rewarding. I wake up each day with a distinct sense that I'm working on the side of the good guys. I help get schools built, I assist in removing drug



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dealers from campus, and I help find ways for school districts to navigate through terrible challenges and threats in these days of budgetary neglect.

Our clients are called upon to provide more customer service than any other field I've seen. Because these agencies and school districts serve the public, they are consistently held to unbelievably exacting standards.

Increasingly sparse teams of administrators must respond to questions, complaints, lawsuits, records demands, and countless daily crises, and do it all in a way that keeps the public's faith in the institution. Many do it well; some do it brilliantly. The fact that they can do it at all, in the face of overwhelming odds—when civility is in rapid decline; where government is viewed by a vocal, disenchanted many as failing to protect the people's interests; despite unfath-

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omable budget cuts; and when the public they deal with most consists of emotional parents focused only on their children—is remarkable.

Our public agency and school district clients hold their outside attorneys to the same standards to which they are held. Early in my tenure with this firm, I was startled to learn that our clients expected us to be available at all times, and to provide immediate responses. Our clients work long days; they are at their desks before school starts, and often still on campus late at night fol-

lowing school board or city council meetings. This means that we must be available on the same schedule. It is not unusual for our lawyers to attend a five-hour board or city council meeting out of town, arrive back home after midnight, and then be available to a superintendent or city manager at 6:30 the next morning.

We live our clients' schedules. Caring genuinely about the kind of work we do helps; caring about the clients themselves is critical.

Perhaps this is why I cringe when I'm told that a lawyer does not check his messages; why I'm embarrassed for my profession when other attorneys promise to return calls and then don't. More often than not, people come to lawyers because they are experiencing trauma, pain, deep threats to themselves, their loved ones, or their businesses. They pay well for our services, and we owe them the courtesy of being here for them.

Until we achieve this level of service, we may be left to contemplate profound questions from our clients, such as, What's the difference between an avocado and an attorney? Answer: One is an unresponsive thing with a heart of stone and thick skin, and the other is an avocado. @

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