

In for the long haul

Canada

Blake, Cassels & Graydon LLP

As one of Canada's most respected legal practices, Blake, Cassels & Graydon bases its approach to business firmly on the long term, safe in the knowledge that cultivating relationships is fundamental to providing good customer service

Certain law firms have realized in recent years that client care is an increasingly important factor in any practice worth its salt. Others have always worked hard to instill in their staff the value of good customer service, through rigorous training sessions and various combinations of carrot and stick. Then there are those which just seem to have engrained in their very nature the propensity to go that extra yard and an innate capacity for the careful consideration of client needs. Blake, Cassels & Graydon is one such firm.

Having celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2006, Blakes is one of Canada's most prestigious law firms. The firm is intensely proud of its heritage and the fact that its growth has been entirely organic, never having gone through merger or acquisition. According to Blakes' chairman, Jim Christie, this is a contributing factor to the caring and inclusive ethos of the firm.

"Our overall philosophy is to focus on long-term relationships with clients," he says. "We make it clear to them that we are not just in it for the file or the matter at issue. A number of things have helped with this and high up the list is the fact that Blakes is a fully integrated partnership and, unlike most of our competitors in Canada, we've grown organically. The result is that there's a close-knit integration of our staff and offices, and that is

more difficult to achieve when merged firms come together. It allows us to provide seamless teams across the country and we've found that to be an attractive feature."

The idea that Blakes is 'in it for the long term' is one of the firm's fundamental tenets; and national managing partner Robert Granatstein also views the enduring relationships for which the firm is renowned as inextricably linked to its attitude towards customer service.

"There is just an incredible depth and breadth of long-term relationships between this firm and its people and so many other organizations and their people," he says. "Underlying it all is an approach that has always been relationship based. When you are maintaining and building really long-term relationships with clients, that breeds a different approach to client service."

Keeping it in the family

This different approach has seen the firm pull out all the stops when it comes to strengthening its links with clients – both professionally, through regular client meetings and a host of legal services, and socially on a more informal footing. Not surprisingly, given the inclusive nature of the Blakes philosophy, many of the social engagements involve a family aspect, such as the recent trip to the premiere of the latest Harry Potter film in Toronto organized for a number of key clients and their children.

"You have to continue to work at cultivating relationships," says Granatstein. "We have tried to build into our socializing a bit of a family element – recognizing that in many families, both parents are now very involved with their kids in ways that maybe weren't as relevant a couple of generations ago, and people get pretty guarded about non-work time. So the prospect of socializing with their legal services provider may not necessarily be top of their list.

"We offer the opportunity for them to bring their families, and for the families of clients to get to know our families, and for us to be able to offer something like a Harry Potter movie or something like that – that's an innovative way of doing something a little bit differently and trying to change with the times."

Canada

Right:
Jim Christie

Far right:
Robert Granatstein



Indeed, Blakes has moved with the times since its inception. In 1878, the law firm was the first business in Canada to install a telephone system that provided a direct link to the offices of the Ontario Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court at Osgoode Hall. It should thus hardly come as a surprise that while, like many firms, it contributes to a number of journals, holds regular client seminars and publishes frequent newsletters, it has also taken this dissemination of its legal information a step further with the introduction of webcasts.

“We’ve always had a tradition of pretty robust professional development, both internal and external,” explains Granatstein. “In fact, one of the things we’ve done for clients is invite them not only to the external events we host for them, but even – on occasion – to our internal events. We’ve also done tons of webcasts now. These are just starting and will turn into podcasts ultimately. Obviously, these are just new ways of distributing information, but it’s important to stay up to date, and they take account of the fact that now what someone wants to do is sit on an aeroplane and look at something for 10 minutes on the one topic that’s of interest to them, rather than have to attend a two-hour seminar at our office. Having said that, those two-hour seminars are incredibly popular and – not to put too fine a point on it – it’s very rare that we don’t generate business out of them.”

Multiple berths

Just as the firm likes to offer a number of different delivery mechanisms for its continuing legal education and professional development, it also likes to ensure that it has a number of different avenues covered in terms of its direct relationships with clients. As with a number of service-centred firms these days, each client usually has a relationship partner (or more than one for larger clients) who looks after the big picture, but everyone involved in the relationship is encouraged to forge ties with the client.

“We actively encourage not only our partners, but also our senior associates to develop relationships with their counterparts at the client end,” says Brock Gibson, a partner in the firm’s Calgary office. “This means we have

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multiple vectors in terms of feedback and from different parts of the organization, and can touch the client at a whole variety of levels. This has an added benefit: as people move around, it allows us to expand our business because relationships are started and people prefer to deal with those whom they're comfortable with."

These relationships are such an engrained part of the way Blakes does business that often they evolve from professional relationships to personal ones. This in turns enriches the professional environment and makes the idea of working in such a client-centric manner much easier, to the point at which it can become second nature.

"It makes things much more interesting," claims Anne Stewart, a partner in the Vancouver office. "You get to know the client better and start to build a more personal relationship, and that certainly makes it fun for me. I think that when young people see that it makes your practice more enjoyable and interesting, it doesn't take much for them to realize that this is good behaviour to model."

Stewart sees these relationships as the very essence of good client care and thinks that any formal training, while available to those who want it, is less important than simply observing and understanding the way business is done at Blakes.

"I do think that client care is something you need to be conscious of all the time," she says. "But I don't think it needs to be turned into a difficult exercise – it's just part of any good relationship. To a certain extent, you learn client

care by watching somebody else do it. Senior people in the office work with junior people and pass on the message. We have seminars on business development and we have lots of material given to us, but I think the biggest thing about client care is to see that it should be through personal communication."

Taking an interest

"What it needs to be is just a really basic interest in your client's business and a really basic interest in your client. It's saying, 'Hey, if I were in that position, what would I want right now? What would I expect from my lawyer?'. It's the little things that often make the biggest difference. It's seeing an article in a magazine or newspaper, cutting it out and saying, 'I thought this might be of interest to you.' Well, even if they saw it on their own, that's going to make a huge impact on a client."

While the firm sees its approach to client care as part and parcel of its everyday work, it certainly doesn't take the effects for granted. To ensure that it continues to hit the spot when it comes to satisfying its customers, a number of checks and balances are put in place.

"We pursue quite aggressively an understanding of how we're doing," says Gibson. "In addition to encouraging the multiple levels of relationship, we participate in client satisfaction surveys that are done by third parties. These take place every two or three years across a large number of



Left:
Brock Gibson

Near right:
Norm Saibil

Far right:
Anne Stewart



representative clients and non-clients, and address client satisfaction and awareness. We also ensure that there are client interviews with senior management from our larger clients on a regular, but *ad hoc*, basis.”

One survey that isn’t commissioned by the firm, but in which it has consistently done well, is the list of Canada’s top 100 employers, compiled by a leading Canadian business publisher. Blakes has made an annual appearance on the list over the last five years and is the only law firm to be included. This is something of which Blakes is rightly proud and, it believes, is yet one more reason why its clients feel at home with the firm.

“One of the most important things is to keep your staff happy,” says Norm Saibil, the managing partner of the Montreal office. “And we do that. The atmosphere is such that the employees, and I mean everyone in the office – partners, associates and all the support staff – they’re happy to be at work and there’s a lot of respect and cooperation going on.

“I know that when I go into a business or another law firm, the first person who greets you is the receptionist and you either get a warm feeling or not. It’s little things, like bring the guy a Diet Coke or whatever he needs. If the staff are happy, they are more likely to keep the client happy.”

The right staff

One of the key factors for any law firm is recruiting the right talent from the crop of new graduates each year, but at a firm like Blakes, with its engrained traditions, this is even more vital.

The firm sifts through around 1,200 CVs each year in Toronto alone and interviews around 500 of those, with – unusually for a law firm of this size – the top executives of the firm, including Christie and Granatstein, getting directly involved in the interview process.

“The firm is looking for people who have the attributes to provide exemplary client service,” explains Granatstein. “To do this, they need to have the internal building blocks necessary to naturally understand what makes a good lawyer. These attributes include collegiality, excellent networking, communication and listening skills, empathy

and the ability to think practically and really understand the needs of others.”

Once the right young lawyers are found, the aforementioned robust professional development programme kicks in to ensure that those attributes are enhanced as the ‘Blakes way’ is absorbed.

“We place a high emphasis on excellence, service, professionalism and trying to do our very best for the client,” says Christie. “I do a lot of client interviews and there’s one factor that comes back in terms of our lawyers: they’re good people to deal with. Of course, they always have been – it’s just happened that over the past couple of years we’ve been stressing it a little more as it’s become a competitive advantage.”

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