

# Client Listening: Why it Pays and How to Do it

SALLY DYSON



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# Executive summary

FOR SOME years, law firm leaders have recognised the importance of putting their clients at the heart of their business development strategy. To do so, they must be able to understand and anticipate their clients' needs and wishes. The best way to do this is to solicit feedback and to listen to their clients. Despite the aspirations of law firm leaders and directors of business development, many firms fail to engage in a consistent and meaningful way with their clients. Individual partners may not perceive the need or are unsure of how to proceed.

*Client Listening: Why it Pays and How to Do It* will help individual lawyers to overcome their fear of engaging with their clients outside the narrow confines of their transactional interaction. This report will further enable practice group, firm, and business development leaders to design, optimise, and implement client listening programmes and to act on the intelligence they receive. Firms that effectively listen to their clients can expect to reap benefits in terms of winning and retaining clients and increasing revenue and profitability (through fewer write-offs and faster payment). They will also be future proofing their firms by embedding client relationships and anticipating client needs.

Part one contains the narrative of this report in eight chapters.

Chapter 1 begins by defining client listening before reporting on the rising adoption of formal client listening processes in the legal sector.

Chapter 2 analyses the benefits of client listening for both firms and their clients, noting the view of Paul Amit, Head of Sector and Client Marketing at DLA Piper, who identifies client listening as 'the single most important marketing activity' that a firm can undertake.

Chapter 3 discusses the role of client listening within a firm's broader client relationship management and business development initiatives.

It is common to encounter pockets of resistance when endeavouring to launch or grow a client listening programme. Typical objections cited by individual lawyers to engaging in client listening are enumerated in Chapter 4, alongside arguments and practical steps that can be employed to surmount such obstacles.

Firms may be aware of a bewildering array of methods for gleaning client feedback. Chapter 5 describes the pros and cons of the principal approaches to securing feedback. This will enable a law firm's leaders to determine the type of client listening activities that will best fit their firm's culture, budget, timetable, and purposes.

Chapter 6 provides a 'how-to' guide for conducting client interviews and designing questionnaires.

Chapter 7, which has been guest written by Tim Nightingale and Graham Archbold of Nisus Consulting, tackles the crucial question of what to do with feedback once it has been obtained in order to ensure that findings are reported, shared, absorbed, and actionable.

The only thing worse than not taking feedback from clients is not acting upon feedback that has been given. Chapter 8 therefore guides the reader through the art of client communication following any listening exercise. It concludes with tried and tested methods for ensuring that listening is converted to action.

Part Two of this report incorporates a wealth of insights in the form of case studies. These have been compiled from detailed conversations with partners and business development professionals at internationally renowned firms.

Case study 1 reflects the perspectives of a selection of partners at DLA Piper in the UK, continental Europe, and the US, who draw on their personal experience of listening to their clients. Case study 2 recounts the role that client listening plays in enabling Ashurst to provide responsive client service. In Case study 3, CMS Cameron McKenna explains how it applies the intelligence that it receives from its client listening programme. K&L Gates describes, in Case study 4, how client listening at the firm is seen as the beginning of a process of deepening client relationships. The fifth and final case study, featuring KPMG, provides lessons for the legal profession from the world of accountancy.

The appendices in Part Three of this report have been designed to assist readers with the design, launch, or fine-tuning of their client listening programmes. Appendix 1 contains an invaluable client listening planner, which walks the reader through the key considerations and decisions to be made prior to launching a client listening programme. Appendix 2 provides a quick reference guide to the various client listening methodologies and the advantages and disadvantages of each. Law firm partners who are new to client listening are often

unsure how to broach the subject with their clients. A template client invitation is therefore set out at Appendix 3. The sample discussion guide in Appendix 4 incorporates the topics most commonly addressed in a client service review while simultaneously providing an example of the type of prompt an interviewer might take into a client listening meeting.

After reading this report, lawyers, firm leaders, and business development practitioners will have a comprehensive understanding of why it pays to listen to clients and will be well equipped to do it.



## About the author

SALLY DYSON is the founder and director of Firm Sense Limited, a consultancy specialising in providing client listening services and client relationship management advice to law firms. Sally qualified as a solicitor and practised at Slaughter and May. She then worked as an in-house lawyer for nearly a decade before moving on from the pursuit of law to establish Firm Sense.

Sally combines expertise in client listening with an in-depth understanding of the legal market to advise law firms on aligning organisational practices and individual behaviour with specific client needs in order to improve client retention, win business, and improve profitability.

Sally is an Affiliate Member of and is regulated by the Market Research Society.

In the context of optimising client relationships, Sally has developed particular knowledge on the topic of law firm fees and is the author of an Ark report entitled *Budgeting and Negotiating Fees with Clients: A Lawyer's Guide*.

Sally is also a regular speaker at public conferences and private workshops and is a contributor to professional journals.

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