FROM THE IUSTORIA BLOG

What a Good Lawyer Looks Like from the Inside

> *Five signs of a good lawyer and three red flags. An insider's perspective the profession would rather keep quiet.*

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My colleagues won't thank me for this article. But I think clients deserve it, because most people have nothing to go on when trying to tell a good lawyer from an average one. The title on the business card, the size of the firm and the hourly rate won't tell you.

The difference shows in things that are almost invisible from the outside and perfectly obvious from inside the profession.

Five Signs of a Good Lawyer

1. They tell you uncomfortable truths

This is the most important sign, and also the one clients least like to hear.

A good lawyer tells you what you need to hear, even when you don't want to hear it. "Your position is weak." "You won't win this dispute." "You're right, but proving it will cost more than you'll recover." "Your draft contract looks favourable at first glance, but it has holes here and here."

A lawyer who only ever nods along is afraid of losing a client. They won't tell you that you are heading in the wrong direction. Reality will tell you instead, and it will send a much bigger bill.

2. They can say "this is not my field"

Law today is highly specialised. A lawyer who makes a living from corporate law doesn't need to understand criminal procedure, and a family lawyer doesn't need to master construction law. Yet plenty of lawyers take on whatever lands on their desk.

A good lawyer knows where their expertise ends. They don't pretend to understand everything; they refer you to a colleague who genuinely works in that area. That, too, is part of being a professional.

When a client comes to me with a criminal law problem, I won't pretend to be a criminal lawyer. I call a colleague who is one and put them in touch with the client. The client gets a better service, my colleague gets the work, and I keep the client's trust, because they know I won't sell them something I don't understand.

3. They communicate proactively

This is where exceptional lawyers differ most from average ones, and yet it is surprisingly simple.

A good lawyer keeps you informed about your case even when nothing dramatic is happening. They write: "The court has scheduled a hearing for 15 March, please keep the date free." Or: "The other side hasn't responded to our letter yet; I'll let you know when they do." Or: "We're waiting for the decision, which usually takes four to six weeks."

Sounds trivial? Not to the client. Someone who doesn't know what is going on starts to feel that nothing is going on, and soon that their lawyer is doing nothing. That is where trust begins to erode.

4. They have a clear pricing framework

Money is a sore subject across the profession. Clients are afraid to ask what it will cost, lawyers are afraid to say, and both sides end up groping in the dark.

A good lawyer explains at the very start how they bill: hourly, on a flat fee, or a combination of both. They estimate the total cost, with the caveat that it may change as the case develops. And if costs move differently than expected, they keep you informed as they go.

A good lawyer doesn't have to be cheap; they often cost more because they can do more. But they should be transparent and tell you what you are paying for and why.

5. They understand your business, not just your file

This is the difference between a lawyer who merely processes a file and a lawyer who advises. The first reads the file and applies the law. The second also understands the context: what industry you are in, what your business goals are and what constrains you.

When a client brings me a draft contract, I don't just read the text. I ask what commercial purpose the transaction serves, what the client's priorities are and what happens if the deal falls through. Only then can I judge whether the contract serves its purpose, or whether it is a legally flawless document that makes no commercial sense.

Three Red Flags

Now for the uncomfortable part: three things that should make you wonder whether you have the right lawyer.

They do not respond to emails for a week or more

Everyone has a hectic week now and then. But if your lawyer systematically fails to reply to emails for more than seven days, that is a problem. Either they have too many clients and don't give you enough attention, or their processes are poorly set up. In the worst case, you are simply not a priority for them.

I consider a reply within 24 to 48 hours a reasonable standard, even if it is just to say: "I've received your email and will come back to you in detail by the end of the week."

They refuse to estimate costs

"We'll see." "It depends on how things develop." "It's impossible to say in advance." Sometimes these statements reflect reality, because some cases genuinely cannot be estimated in advance. But if that is the standard answer to every question about price, it is a red flag.

It means one of two things: either the lawyer lacks enough experience with this type of case to estimate the costs, or they don't want to be held to an estimate they will later exceed.

They promise outcomes

Of all the red flags, this is the most serious. A lawyer who tells you "we'll win this" before properly studying the case is either lying to you or doesn't understand it.

A responsible lawyer cannot guarantee an outcome. They can say: "Your position is strong." They can say: "Your chances of success are above average." Or: "Courts usually decide similar cases in the claimant's favour." But they won't say "we'll win", because the court decides the outcome.

Why I Am Writing This

I think clients deserve better yardsticks than "How many stars does the firm have on Google?" or "What's the hourly rate?". The quality of legal services shows in things you can't see at first glance. It becomes visible only in whether your dispute ended well, whether your contract holds and whether your business works.

And frankly, we lawyers also need clients to keep us on our toes. A client who asks the right questions makes their lawyer work better.

For concrete examples of how a good lawyer should think about a dispute, see Not every battle is worth fighting and When to go to court and when to mediate. How the money side works is covered in Attorney's fees in court. Being able to say "this isn't my field" has a deeper dimension too. Sometimes the problem isn't legal at all, and instead of another lawsuit the client needs a therapist, a crisis-PR specialist or a mediator. I have devoted a separate piece to that: The lawyer as illusionist: magic, therapy or PR.

> **Looking for a lawyer who will tell you uncomfortable truths and has a clear pricing framework?** In our practice we open every matter with an honest diagnosis: what is winnable, what it costs and when not playing is the better call. Get in touch.

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