



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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This is the article my colleagues will not thank me for writing. But I believe clients deserve it — because most people have no frame of reference for telling a good lawyer from an average one. And that difference is not measured by the title on the business card, the size of the office, or the hourly rate.

It is measured by things that are nearly invisible from the outside — but glaringly obvious from within 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 want to hear.

A good lawyer does not tell you what you want to hear. They tell you what you need to hear. "Your position is weak." "You will not win this dispute." "You are right, but proving it will cost more than you will recover." "Your draft contract looks favourable at first glance, but it has gaps here and here."

A lawyer who always nods along is not a good lawyer. They are a salesperson afraid of losing a client. And a salesperson afraid of losing a client will not tell you that you are heading in the wrong direction — reality will, and reality charges considerably more.

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

The law today is extraordinarily specialised. A lawyer who practises corporate law has no reason to understand criminal proceedings. A family lawyer has no reason to master construction law. And yet, a remarkable number of lawyers will accept whatever lands on their desk.

A good lawyer knows where their competence ends. Instead of pretending to understand everything, they refer you to a colleague who actually specialises in the relevant area. This is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of professionalism.

When a client comes to me with a criminal law problem, I will not pretend to be a criminal lawyer. I will call a colleague who is one and connect them with the client. The client gets better service. The colleague gets work. And I retain my credibility — because the client knows I will not sell them something I do not understand.

3. They communicate proactively

This is the quality that separates exceptional lawyers from average ones, and it is surprisingly simple.

A good lawyer keeps you informed about the progress of your case even when nothing dramatic is happening. They write: "The court has scheduled a hearing for 15 March — plan accordingly." Or: "The other side has not yet responded to our demand letter — I will let you know when they do." Or: "We are waiting for the decision; it usually takes four to six weeks."

Does this sound trivial? For the client, it is anything but. A client who does not know what is happening starts feeling that nothing is happening. And a client who feels that nothing is happening starts feeling that their lawyer is doing nothing. That is the beginning of the end of trust.

4. They have a clear pricing framework

This is a sore point for the entire profession. Clients are afraid to ask how much it will cost. Lawyers are afraid to say how much it will cost. The result is that both sides operate in a fog.

A good lawyer explains at the outset how they bill. Whether by the hour, on a flat fee, or some combination of both. They give you an estimate of total costs — with the caveat that costs may shift depending on how the case develops. And they keep you informed if costs trend differently from what was anticipated.

This is not about a good lawyer needing to be cheap. Quite the opposite — a good lawyer often costs more, because they deliver more value. But they should be transparent. They should 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 and a legal adviser. A lawyer reads the file and applies the law. A legal adviser understands context — they know what industry you operate in, what your commercial objectives are, what constraints you face.

When a client brings me a draft contract, I do not just read the text. I ask: What is the business intent behind this transaction? What are your priorities? What happens if it does not work out? Only once I know that can I assess whether the contract serves its purpose — or whether it is simply a legally flawless document that makes no commercial sense.

Three Red Flags

Now the uncomfortable part. Three things that should make you question whether you have the right lawyer.

They do not respond to emails for a week or more

Everyone has a demanding week from time to time. But if your lawyer systematically fails to answer emails for more than seven days, there is a problem. Either they have too many clients and are not giving you adequate attention, or their processes are poorly set up, or — and this is the worst scenario — they do not consider you a priority.

A good lawyer responds within 24 to 48 hours, even if only to say: "I have received your email and will respond in detail by the end of the week."

They refuse to estimate costs

"We will see." "It depends on how things develop." "There is no way to say in advance." Sometimes these statements reflect reality — certain cases genuinely cannot be estimated. But if this is the standard answer to every question about price, it is a warning sign.

It means one of two things: either the lawyer lacks sufficient experience with this type of case to estimate costs, or they do not want to bear responsibility for an estimate they might exceed.

They promise outcomes

This is the biggest red flag of all. A lawyer who tells you "we will win this" before they have thoroughly studied the case is either lying to you or does not understand it.

No responsible lawyer can guarantee a result. They can say: "Your position is strong." They can say: "The odds of success are above average." They can say: "Similar cases are typically decided in the claimant's favour." But they cannot say: "We will win." Because the outcome is decided by the court, not the lawyer.

Why I Am Writing This

Because I believe clients deserve better benchmarks than "How many Google stars do they have?" or "What is their hourly rate?" Because the quality of legal service is measured by things that are not visible at first glance — but that show up at the end in whether your dispute turned out well, your contract holds, and your business works.

And because — honestly — we lawyers also need clients who keep us on our toes. A good client who asks the right questions makes a better lawyer. And a better lawyer produces better outcomes for everyone.

For specific examples of how a good lawyer should think about disputes, see [Not every battle is worth fighting](#) and [When to go to court and when to mediate](#). And if you care about transparency on money, see [Attorney's fees in court](#). The fact that a good lawyer can say "this isn't my field" has a deeper dimension too: recognising that the problem isn't *legal at all* — that the client needs a therapist, a crisis-PR specialist or a mediator rather than another lawsuit — is the topic of a separate piece, [The lawyer as illusionist: magic, therapy or PR](#).

Looking for a lawyer who tells you the uncomfortable truths and has a clear pricing framework? In our [practice](#) we open every matter with an honest diagnosis — what is winnable, what costs how much, and when not playing is the better call. [Get in touch](#).

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