

Talk Is Not Cheap: Why Communication Is the Most Valuable Service You Provide

In many types of legal work, no news is *not* good news. Lawyers' failures to regularly communicate often result in clients feeling disgruntled and occasionally even in the filing of grievances.

BY ANDREW S. KRYDER

Sometimes as a lawyer it's easy to fall into the routine of focusing on the work: going to court, legal drafting, filing documents, arguing motions. It can become easy to put client communication on the back burner. As lawyers, we may know a case is advancing appropriately, but if we do not communicate updates to our clients they are left to wonder what is going on. In the eyes of the client, silence doesn't signal diligence. It signals neglect and incompetence.

Let's take a closer look at what the Wisconsin Rules of Professional Conduct require and what can happen when lawyers fail to communicate with their clients. Then let's review some practical strategies to keep clients informed. Lastly, let's reshape the way we view client communications. Regular client communication should not feel like a chore; instead, view it as an opportunity. When done right, it can be easy, keep you out of sticky ethical situations, improve your client relationships, and help your business grow.

The Duty to Communicate under SCR 20:1.4

The Wisconsin Rules of Professional Conduct make client communication a professional responsibility, not an optional courtesy.¹

Supreme Court Rule (SCR) 20:1.4(a) provides that a lawyer must:

- 1) Promptly inform the client** of any decision or circumstance requiring the client's informed consent,
- 2) Reasonably consult** with the client about the means by which the client's objectives are to be accomplished,

- 3) Keep the client reasonably informed** about the status of the matter,
- 4) Promptly comply with reasonable requests** for information, and
- 5) Consult with the client** about any relevant limitation on the lawyer's conduct.

SCR 20:1.4(b) goes further, stating:

"A lawyer shall explain a matter to the extent reasonably necessary to permit the client to make informed decisions regarding the representation."



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This can require you to explain complex legal issues in an easy-to-understand way. As lawyers, we are communicators. A major part of our job is to advise and communicate legal options. This is why clients hire us: for our expertise and guidance. Communicating that advice and guidance should always be a priority at every stage of the case. Think about communication with clients at each stage of representation. How are you currently communicating with clients as they are welcomed as a

new client, during the representation process, and when you conclude their legal matter? Craft standard communications for each stage that can be easily modified.

Your clients shouldn't be left guessing about their legal matter. Whether it's a status update on discovery, the outcome of a motion, or the implications of a legal strategy, SCR 20:1.4 requires timely, clear, and consistent communication during the entire course of representation.

When Silence Becomes a Problem

When lawyers fail to communicate, there can be severe consequences ethically, professionally, and financially. Common problems that arise from poor client communication include the following:

Disciplinary complaints. Lack of communication is one of the most common reasons clients file grievances. In fact, the 2024 Wisconsin Office of Lawyer Regulation Annual Report noted that of the 1,729 grievances received, 896 or 51.8%, were made by clients. Moreover, 14.92% of the grievances involved lack of communication.² In sum, keeping clients informed not only keeps clients happy, it can greatly reduce ethical concerns.

Loss of client trust. Even when no formal grievance is filed, lack of communication diminishes client trust and confidence. Clients often equate silence with neglect. Clients hire lawyers to help with sensitive legal matters: divorce, personal injury, real estate matters, criminal defense, and business disputes. The client is relying on you as a lawyer to guide them through a difficult, often complex, situation. Without regular communication clients are left to wonder if their legal matter is being neglected and whether their interests are being protected.

Negative financial consequences. Have you ever lost a client due to poor communication? Clients who feel ignored may seek other counsel, or refuse to pay legal bills, all of which impact your firm's bottom line. Think about how much time, energy, and resources you invest in acquiring new clients. Don't squander your efforts because you have not thought through how to deliver regular updates. A client lost because of poor communication is almost always preventable.

Bad reviews. Have you ever received a bad review that mentions poor communication? Dissatisfied clients are often the most vocal. Once the review is posted your reputation is tarnished and it can impact your law firm's revenue.

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A recent study showed that as many as 98% of consumers rely on reviews to inform their purchase decision, with some consumers listing it as the number-one factor.³ As a lawyer you have an ethical duty to keep your clients informed. But also, as a law firm owner, you can't afford to have your law firm branded negatively by dissatisfied clients. You can't prevent every bad review, but you can minimize certain types of bad reviews through regular communication.

Tips to Comply with Ethics Rules and Keep You, Your Staff, and Clients Happy

Failing to properly communicate with our clients can have many negative consequences. The good news is that good communication, done correctly, can lead to many positive things in your practice. Here are some practical solutions to improve client communication in your practice.

Set expectations early. Start by establishing a communication policy at the very beginning of your representation. Let clients know you will contact them and how often they can expect updates. Establish what types of communications are billable and how clients can reach you in emergencies. Putting these things in your engagement letter or discussing the communication schedule helps avoid misunderstandings.

Use templates for routine updates. Not every update needs to be crafted from scratch. Create email templates for common milestones like "Complaint Filed," "Discovery in Progress," or "Mediation Scheduled." These can be customized swiftly and go a long way toward keeping clients updated. Or consider using AI tools to help you craft first drafts of communications. When doing so, be sure to proofread drafts thoroughly.

Delegate strategically and thoughtfully. Train paralegals or support staff

to provide certain types of updates under your supervision. Clients often just want reassurance that something is happening. A five-minute call from your assistant may make all the difference and save you the time of a much longer call at some point in the future.

Schedule communication as a task. Use your case management system or calendar to set reminders for regular check-ins with each client, even if there's no major development. A simple "just checking in" message every so often can maintain rapport and prevent grievances. A simple phone call or email demonstrates to the client that you are attentive. Moreover, proactive communications are often better received than reactive communications.

Set aside time exclusively dedicated to client communication. Sometimes lawyers postpone call backs because they feel other things take priority. If you schedule time each week for

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calls and correspondence it can help manage your time and improve the level of communication provided. For example, let clients know that you schedule 10-15-minute status calls each Wednesday afternoon. This conditions you to make calls during this timeframe and conditions the client to know when they can schedule time with you. You can send clients a link to your calendar, making the scheduling process effortless. This manages your time efficiently and makes your clients feel that you are accessible. Software such as Calendly is affordable and easy to implement. If you are sending access to your calendar for scheduling purposes, make sure you and your staff do not inadvertently share the names of other clients or legal matters you may be handling.

Consider using videoconference calls. Videoconference calls create a scheduled beginning and end to the meeting. This way you do not get

“stuck” on a call. A videoconference call also allows you to have a better read on your client’s understanding of the conversation. You may be explaining complicated legal issues. Having the ability to see your client’s reactions can help you gauge their level of understanding and whether additional explanation is warranted.

Take credit for what you have done.

Being a lawyer can sometimes be a thankless job. You know how hard you are working for clients. Why not let them know too? When you complete something on a client’s case, call and tell them. By doing so, you are fulfilling your ethical responsibility, and they will likely be grateful for the update. You may even get a thank you.

One outbound call can prevent two incoming calls. Sometimes returning calls can feel like a chore, especially when it interrupts your day. Reducing unplanned calls can reduce your

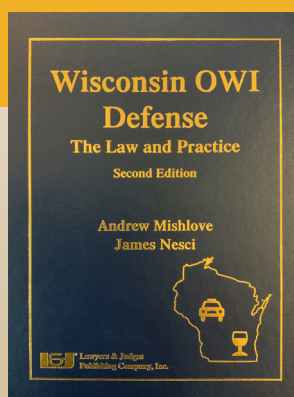
reluctance to promptly return a client call. We have all experienced the client who calls multiple times a day. Each time they call their level of frustration increases. When you are finally able to take the call or return the call, tempers have heightened. Regularly scheduled outbound status calls to your clients can eliminate, or drastically reduce, this type of occurrence. Avoiding these situations saves you and your staff time and frustration.

Just make the call. Even when it is bad news. Delivering bad news is never easy. As attorneys we sometimes have to relay disappointing news. Perhaps there was an adverse ruling or a deposition did not go as planned. A natural reaction may be to delay reporting unfortunate outcomes. However, postponing these types of conversations never makes it easier. Just make the call. Be even and direct. Most times the call will go better than what you had envisioned.

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Conclusion: Communication as a Cornerstone of Practice

All too often, attorneys view communication as a secondary task or a chore. View regular communication with your clients as an opportunity to build relationships. Regular communication builds trust, prevents complaints, and benefits your bottom line. Plus, you will be surprised how grateful most clients are when you keep them informed. **WL**

ENDNOTES

¹All current Wisconsin Supreme Court Rules are available at https://www.wicourts.gov/supreme/sc_rules.jsp (last visited Feb. 3, 2026).

²Office of Lawyer Regulation Annual Report: FY 2023/2024 at 20-21, <https://www.wicourts.gov/courts/offices/docs/olr-2024fiscal.pdf> (last visited Feb. 3, 2026).

³Subhash Jha, Abhijit Biswas & Prashanth Ravula, *What Consumers Find Persuasive in Online Reviews*, Harv. Bus. Rev. (Feb. 18, 2025), <https://hbr.org/2025/02/research-what-consumers-find-persuasive-in-online-reviews>. **WL**