

Direct Access ... are you delivering?

By Jonathan Maskew, consultant at Shensmith Barristers chambers



It is clear that direct access is playing an increasing larger part of the revenue stream for many chambers and barristers, whether it is a greater understanding and acceptance of this cost effective route by those seeking legal assistance or indeed those offering the service are much more aware of the huge opportunity it offers and therefore the communication and message to clients is better defined, easier and clearer.

The impact for direct access barristers can be significant, whilst there are always challenges, those who are flexible in their approach and have the ability to deliver new initiatives are creating some very exciting opportunities and adding real value to the client experience.

Clients becoming the driving force ...

As always, for those who seek feedback on levels of service, the client is paramount and it's no different here; *"The client is the driving force"* and they are seeking far greater efficiency, transparency and affordable legal services in a rapidly changing market.

More demanding than ever, with an increasing awareness of their buying power the client invariably wants advice and guidance directly from the barrister and quickly.

So the burning and vital question you should be asking both your clients and yourselves in chambers is ... *"Are we delivering for our direct access clients?"*

For many clients, the typical route has not managed their expectations well enough and has been frustrating for them to say the least. There have always been difficulties, including for example issues with response times, who they expect to respond, the method of response and the lack of clarity with regards to costs emerges more often than not.

In addition, clients are often quizzed in detail at various stages, by different people with regards to their legal dispute and the levels of



“friction” between client and barrister is heightened. This friction, caused by this somewhat difficult journey is often due to the lack of barrister engagement at an early stage. From the clients perspective an essential part of the journey is in the early stages and clearly has a significant impact, ultimately making the difference in committing to instruct in a direct access matter or not.

This engagement and often through a short initial discussion becomes a vital part of the human intelligence and influence that clients understand and expect from specialist legal advisers to assist them in shaping and influencing a solution to their legal problem or dispute.

It is, for them, likely to be their only legal matter and undoubtedly emotionally attached to it of course, therefore, any additional friction caused will only seek to encourage them to think again about whom they share confidential details with and engage with to assist them moving forward and in some circumstances refer back to the typical route of a high-street solicitors firm.

Whilst collecting a simple summary of the matter by an electronic form is the norm and expected by the client, if the initial response is merely an opportunity to confirm the information provided by them and by staff who possess very little empathy or life experience, then the ability to add value in any shape of form is missed and ultimately fails to deliver what the client wants and what it says on the tin.... *“direct access to a barrister”* In seeking the perfect solution, which has to be client focused, it would need to be seamless in its approach, offered at a time and location convenient to them, with the minimum of friction, and likely to include or be technology driven.

There is no doubt that swift barrister engagement with a view to building the relationship is becoming an essential ingredient for clients when deciding to instruct and those who have well-developed inter-personal skills are adding real value to the experience and proving to be vital. Indeed, some exciting opportunities are emerging for those who embrace, understand and where necessary make appropriate changes to their delivery and engagement strategies.

Innovative ideas from new entrants will create healthy competition but often they are based simply on an idea and concept with greater use of technology delivering “you” the barrister. Without the “barrister” element, the ability to convert the idea into the action and doing it, ensuring it adds value then it will deliver nothing more than a new concept of delivery and very little outcome for the client.

Many who have ventured into the video message and recording will have seen the benefits of its delivery of a clear message to clients and the cost effective solution instructing barristers directly provides. Research shows that the YouTube viewing time grew 60% last quarter reaching staggering numbers. It goes without saying that the increasing use of video to communicate the offering to clients will prove a major play for those embracing such methods.

For some, this is proving to be the start of an online and video initiative to drive simple clear messages whilst pushing the boundaries even further in more effective and dynamic ways to deliver the barrister service directly. ShenSmith Barristers is proving that one solution that is adding real value to the client experience, saving on costs and time is through the innovative use of an online video conferencing platform. With free monthly online legal surgeries via video conferencing, this is proving to be a very successful route of delivery to businesses, SMEs and individuals who are often deterred from taking legal advice in the first place.

In short, this online offering is very much the A, B, C client focused solution; Affordable, Barrister driven, Convenient and Immediate. With such overwhelmingly positive feedback to date from clients who have taken advantage of the offering, all those involved have clearly seen the benefits and value added to this innovative way of delivering barristers directly.

Whilst there are many new exciting ways to deliver and huge speculation with regards to the provision of future legal advice with the introduction of *“legal robots, virtual assistants”* and such like, to stand out and differentiate for clients remains firmly with those working towards the ability to deliver directly you, the barrister.



Jonathan Maskew is a consultant to chambers and has worked extensively in a variety of roles with Barristers and Chambers for over 25 years. As Co-founder and Director he is currently working alongside Daniel ShenSmith with ShenSmith Barristers, a new remote business support model for barristers and chambers throughout the UK and further.

If you are interested in discussing any of these matters further or wish to contact Jonathan you can email him directly jonathan@shensmithbarristers.co.uk or visit www.ShenSmithBarristers.co.uk