

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



BTI Client Service A-Team 2026

Survey of Law Firm Client Service Performance



Introduction

Why a Tiny Group of Law Firms Keeps Crushing the Market on Profits

Most law firms have no idea why a small group of competitors keeps crushing them on profits.

They see the headlines: Record PPP. Explosive growth. Premium rates. Relentless demand. Expanding market power.

Then comes the industry-wide rationalization exercises. They say:

“It’s leverage.”

“It’s prestige.”

“It’s practice mix.”

“It’s compensation.”

“It’s laterals.”

“It’s AI.”

“It’s luck.”

No.

Those explanations comfort firms far more than they explain elite profitability.

The real advantage sits somewhere far less visible – inside the client relationship itself.

A small group of firms has achieved something most competitors never reach: clients trust them enough to change their behavior around them.

And once client behavior changes, economics change simultaneously – and it becomes an economic edge for law firms.

Clients of these top-performing firms:

- Share critical information before formal discussions begin
- Warn firms about risks before problems explode
- Reveal hidden organizational dynamics through candid conversations
- Advocate internally to increase the firm’s influence
- Provide broader and earlier access to leadership
- Extend patience during inevitable setbacks
- Accept difficult advice faster and with less resistance
- Accelerate internal approvals and decisions
- Pay invoices faster and challenge bills less
- Entrust firms with larger, more strategic matters

None of these advantages appear in public rankings. All of them drive profits.

Introduction

Most Firms Still Misunderstand Client Service Completely

They reduce it to responsiveness, friendliness, and avoiding mistakes – as if elite client relationships come from being pleasant and efficient.

They do not.

Elite client service changes how clients think, act, share information, make decisions, allocate risk, and distribute opportunity.

This helps explain one of the most staggering realities in the legal industry:

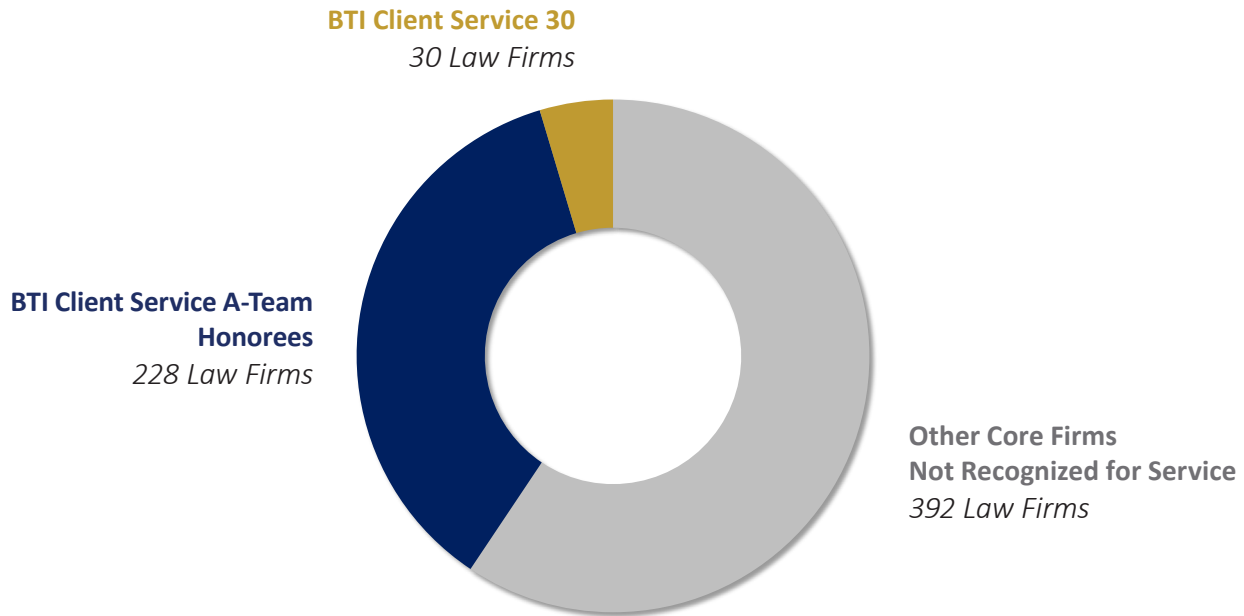
Only 5% of law firms generate 40% of profits. Who are the top 5%: the firms clients named to The BTI Client Service 30. Add in the firms making the strongest gains in client service performance, and an extraordinarily small segment of the market controls more than 60% of profits.

The *BTI Client Service A-Team 2026* reveals the specific habits, behaviors, and relationship advantages driving this separation – and why client service remains one of the most powerful, least understood profit engines in the legal market.

The BTI Client Service A-Team Rankings

258 Law Firms Named by Corporate Counsel

According to BTI’s research, 650 core law firms serve large and Fortune 1000 clients. However, only 258 law firms, are singled out – by name – by legal decision-makers for their prowess in at least 1 of the 17 activities driving the best client relationships.



The Best, the Strong, and the Missing in Action: Clients Rank Law Firm Client Service Performance

The BTI Client Service 30 performs 9 to 15 times better than all others. They account for less than 5% of all law firms competing for business at larger companies. We take a deeper dive into these top 30 firms beginning on page 26.

Clients recognize another 35.1% of law firms chasing the heels of the elite. This group is strong on key aspects of client service delivery and positioning itself to give the other firms a run for their money. We present the details of how these firms rank – both overall – and according to 17 activities driving client service.

Fully 60% of all law firms serving this market are missing in action. The increased client service volatility offers more opportunities for these firms to earn their way into the client service leadership groups.

The BTI 17 Activities Driving The Best Client Relationships

Powerful Insight into the 17 Activities Driving Client Development and the Best Client Relationships

BTI's exclusive, independent, one-on-one interviews and surveys with more than 30,000 corporate counsel and C-level executives reveal 17 specific and unique activities driving growth and client development. Of these 17 driving factors:

Clients see 6 activities as scarce, delivering strategic value – linking legal issues and business issues – and supporting the related decisions.

You and the firm's attorneys can draw on these primary activities to deliver the best client service and drive more business from existing clients, in good times or bad. These 6 decisive activities are:

- **Proving Your Commitment to Help** (*detailed implementation plans explained on page 98*)
- **Client Focus** (*detailed implementation plans explained on page 102*)
- **Understanding the Client's Business** (*detailed implementation plans explained on page 105*)
- **Providing Value for the Dollar** (*detailed implementation plans explained on page 109*)
- **Assess & Act Quickly** (*detailed implementation plans explained on page 95*)
- **Fields the Absolute Best Team** (*detailed implementation plans explained on page 112*)

And these go with the client service activities defining the Price of Admission, the minimum requirements for delivering excellent client service:

- Dealing with Unexpected Changes
- Excellent Quality Deliverables
- Keeping Clients Informed
- Handling the Inevitable Problems
- Legal Skills and Prowess
- Delivering on Core Scope

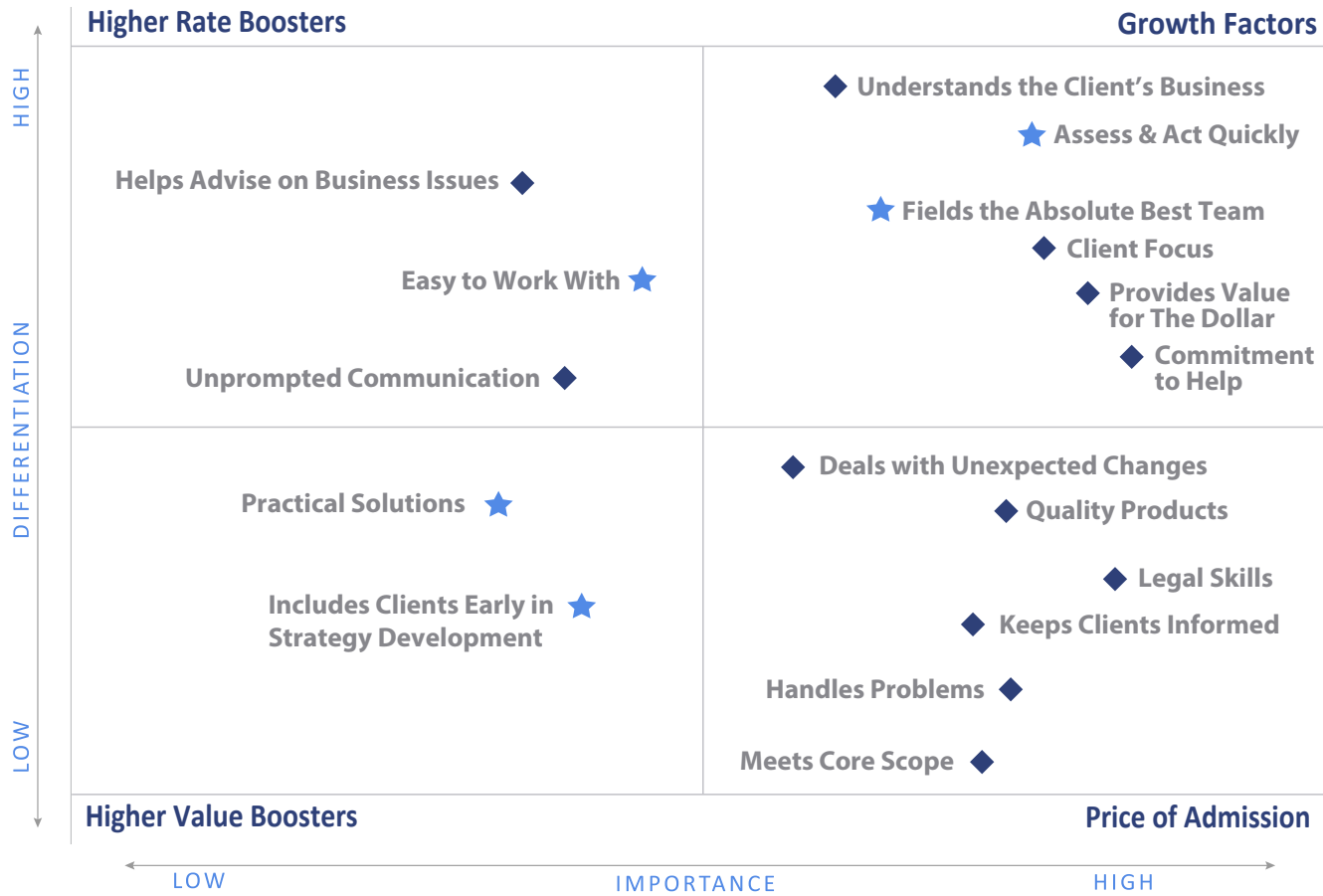
A savvy group of 258 law firms were able to deliver on client service expectations. These firms know how to help their clients and acted quickly – without being asked. Some were already best-in-class performers and others got a shot of client service adrenaline – they moved from very good to excellent.

The swirl of new regulations, political volatility, and workplace activism combined with peak management interest create the most compelling need for superior client service.

Clients continue to look to outside counsel more than ever. Look for the client service needs to change and evolve – but the best performers will have the best access to clients and be able to spot the new expectations first.

Clients rely on outside counsel more than ever. More reliance translates directly into higher value matters, more complexity. Clients now have the highest expectations of law firms they have ever had. And the market offers the highest rewards.

The BTI 17 Activities Driving The Best Client Relationships



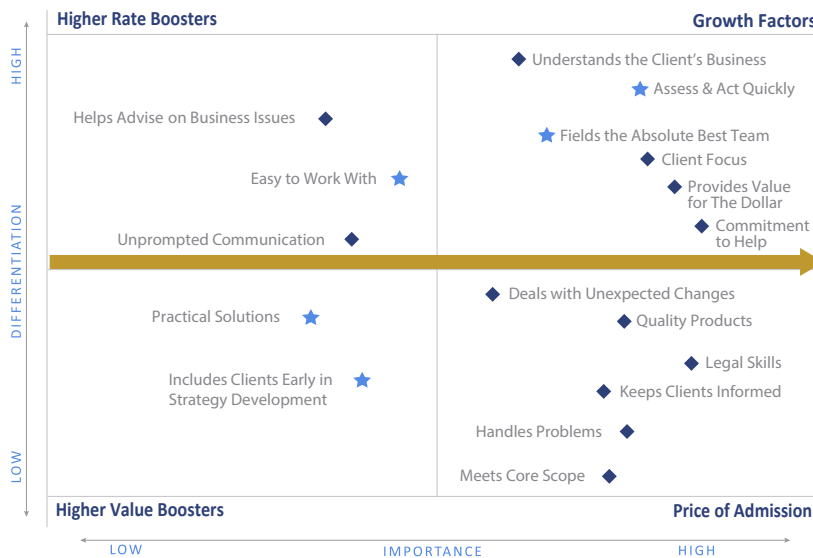
Source: Clientelligence™: How Superior Client Relationships Fuel Growth and Profits by Michael B. Rynowecer

The BTI 17 Activities Driving The Best Client Relationships

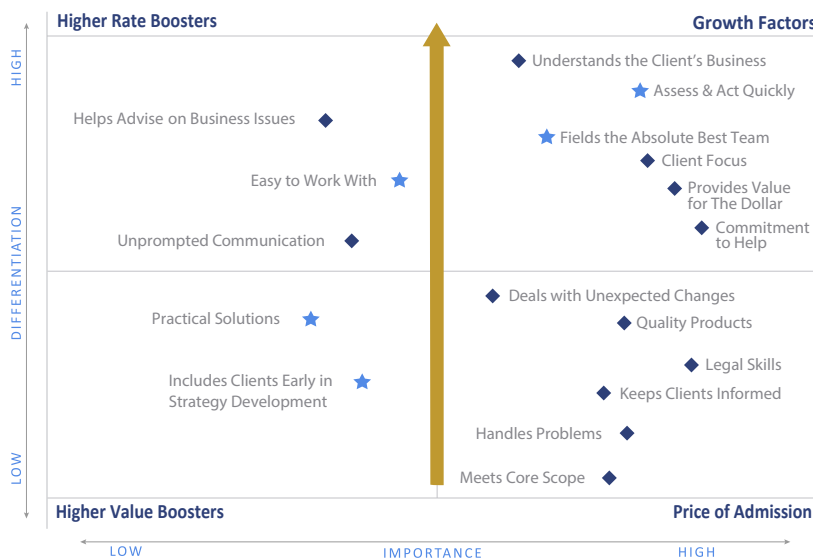
BTI’s research with more than 28,000 buyers of professional services isolates the 17 activities essential to delivering the best client service and driving the best professional relationships. Corporate counsel then assess each activity on 2 dimensions – importance and differentiation – to identify the activities most important and most influential when evaluating legal providers.

How to Read BTI's 17 Activities Quadrant Map

BTI’s 17 Activities Quadrant Map measures the components of client service along 2 key dimensions:



The horizontal axis of this chart represents relative importance of each activity. Activities on the right side of the chart are more important to legal decision makers than activities on the left side.



The vertical axis of this chart represents the strength of each activity’s ability to differentiate a law firm. Activities on the top half of the chart are harder for legal decision makers to find in a law firm – making them strong differentiators.

BTI’s ongoing research with corporate counsel shows how each quadrant in the chart exhibits distinct characteristics and plays an important role in developing and maintaining the best relationships with legal decision makers.

Understanding the Impact of Each Client Service Attribute and Activity

What are BTI's 17 Activities Driving The Best Client Relationships and Development?

The Growth Factors: The Upper Right

8 activities are most important to corporate counsel. Corporate counsel see these activities as scarce; yet, they drive hiring decisions on a continuing basis. Law firms can draw on these growth factors to develop substantially more business from existing clients.

Price of Admission: The Lower Right

Corporate counsel point to 6 activities as the minimum requirements expected from any law firm. These activities are of high importance. They are also widely available. Clients expect you to deliver these activities in order to win work, but they do not differentiate you enough to be the sole decision criteria.

Higher Rate Boosters: The Upper Left

These 3 high-value differentiators are proven to motivate a client to see more value – and pay for it. The best clients – those with complex needs and paying higher rates – value these activities the most.

Immediate Value Boosters: The Lower Left

These are business development tools under cover of client service. These activities are:

- Practical Solutions
- Includes Clients Early in Strategy and Approach

These drivers instill unmatched confidence in a law firm – not having to worry about solutions and approach relieves 2 of the biggest client concerns.

Clients Rank Law Firms by Performance Levels

Nominated law firms receive 1 of 4 honors correlating to their level of achievement in each of the 17 Activities Driving The Best Client Relationships:

★★★★★ Best of the Best

The Best of the Best, these firms perform 9 to 15 times better than typical law firms. Clients see these firms at the pinnacle of performance in the BTI Client Service A-Team; they set the standard for other firms to match.

★★★ Leaders

Clients rank these firms as nipping at the heels of the Best of the Best. Part of a select group of firms, Leaders are on the cusp of the Best of the Best and stand ahead of most law firms in the market.

★★ Distinguished

The Distinguished client service performers are in the upper ranks of all law firms. They put tremendous distance between themselves and most other firms.

★ Standouts

The law firms who stand out for their performance in the BTI Client Service A-Team, these firms are already ranked higher than more than half the market – placing them in a distinct group clients see as providing the superior levels of client service required to truly differentiate these Standout firms.

Missing in Action

Clients managed to overlook the 392 law firms not included in the BTI Client Service A-Team. In many cases, client service is at minimally acceptable levels – which neither meet nor exceed client expectations. Many of these firms have sporadic efforts to boost client service or have partners who deliver excellent client service – but don't deliver firmwide. These firms can change their performance with the right programs and management backing.

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Methodology and Approach



Methodology and Approach

2026 Survey Participant Demographics

BTI Client Service A-Team 2026 draws on data collected in BTI’s ongoing Annual Survey of General Counsel. This study includes between 50% and 55% of companies participating in prior years. This approach provides for accurate analysis of longitudinal trends while simultaneously allowing for insights into new, changing, and coming shifts in the legal market.

INTERVIEWS AND SURVEYS: More than **350**

TIME FRAME: Conducted between **June 2025** and **March 2026**

INCENTIVES: Contributors receive a complimentary report of legal benchmarks and metrics

Highest-ranking Legal Decision Makers

- General Counsel/Chief Legal Officer
- Direct Report to General Counsel
- Other Legal Decision Maker



No law firm submissions, self-referrals, firm referrals, suggestions, or payments are accepted for inclusion.



All interviews with top legal decision makers are confidential and anonymous, by company and person.



Probed more than 300 top legal decision makers at large organizations with \$1 billion or more in revenue.



The BTI Client Service A-Team 2026 draws solely on in-depth, telephone-based interviews as part of BTI’s ongoing Annual Survey of General Counsel, now in its 25th year.



BTI is the sole sponsor of this research. BTI funds the research and controls the editorial content.

Representative of More Than 15 Industry Segments

Companies ranged in size from \$1 billion in revenue to the largest companies in the world.

Banking	Healthcare	Professional Services
Chemicals	High Tech	Retail Trade
Consumer Goods	Insurance	Telecom
Energy	Investment Banks	Transportation
Financial Services	Manufacturing	Wholesale Trade
Food & Agriculture	Pharma	



About The BTI Consulting Group, Inc.



What We Do

For more than 30 years, we've successfully helped our clients strategically drive revenue, boost performance, attract and retain clients, develop more business in new and existing markets, and create enduring relationships with our data-driven customized programs and solutions tailored to meet each client's specific and unique needs.

We examine the market from your client's perspective with a measurable, innovative, and high-impact approach.

From in-depth independent research to one-on-one interviews with C-suite executives, top legal decision makers and market leaders, our expertise and insight will help you understand – as well as benchmark – how clients acquire, manage, and evaluate their professional services providers.



Client Feedback Programs

We help you reveal powerful, defining client insights you simply can't get anywhere else through innovative, world-class feedback.



Business Development Training

We help you and your firm catapult your business development skills, culture, and mindset – fast.



Client Service Excellence

We help you redefine how clients think about you and your firm for the short and long term.



Market Research and Insightful Client-Centric Reports

Authoritative, innovative, and practical advice from our research. BTI's client service rankings, brand health assessments, market forecasts, and more are the industry gold standard.

Leading-Edge Insights

Authoritative, innovative, and practical advice from our research

Law firms who would otherwise have little insight into corporate counsel hiring decisions, goals, law firm preferences, market positions, and detailed recommendations can now gain access to the same research used by the largest and best-performing firms in the world. The data and insight found in BTI’s reports are used to train attorneys, guide business development, inform strategy, and calibrate market trends against firm tactics. In short, you get many of the benefits of a custom study commissioned for your firm at a fraction of the cost. These insights are proven to drive growth and client retention and protect fees.

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BTI Associate A-Listeners 2026

Partners and practices fueling genuine advancement keep top talent far longer – turning flight risk into long-term commitment, particularly for women who value targeted development. *BTI Associate A-Listeners 2026: BTI Survey of Law Firms Where Associates are Happiest* has rapidly become the essential guide for winning – and keeping – elite associate talent across genders.



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BTI Super Listener A-Team 2026: Clients Rank Law Firms Best at BD

BTI Super Listener A-Team 2026 is your guide to business development excellence. Super Listeners pick up on pauses, hesitations, shifts in tone – and understand what it all means. Nothing beats these activities for developing new business. The best business developers know this – and live by it. This exclusive report lays out how clients define these behaviors – and the firms clients name as best at each one.



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BTI Practice Outlook 2026: The Opportunity-Rich Market

BTI Practice Outlook 2026 is your roadmap to where spending will grow, which practices command premium rates and which industries are set to generate the highest-value opportunities. This report zeroes in on the hottest practices, biggest spending surges, and the business development strategies winning the work.



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BTI Litigation Outlook 2026

Our 16th *BTI Litigation Outlook* reveals the vast increase in complexity and spending in litigation. This turbocharged litigation market is accelerating faster, hitting harder, and offering more opportunity for law firms than ever. The *BTI Litigation Outlook* is your roadmap to this premium rate growth.

Michael B. Rynowecer, Founder & President a.k.a. The Mad Clientist



For questions, research inquiries, and information about BTI's client feedback programs, market insight research, seminars, training, or workshops, please contact us by calling **+1 617 439 0333** or via email at **mrynowecer@bticonsulting.com**.

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