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TRUSTED ADVISOR CHEAT SHEET

What General Counsel Wants to Hear on Your Next Call

"Trusted advisor" is earned over years, which is why the advice on positioning yourself as one often feels nebulous in the day-to-day of managing client relationships. Drawn from recent commentary by general counsel across surveys from Chambers, KPMG, and Thomson Reuters, these six micro-actions are meant to bridge the gap in your day-to-day interactions.

WHAT GCS ARE SAYING

17%

Only 17% of GCs say outside counsel distinguish themselves on understanding the business *(Chambers, 2026)*.

"Extensions"

The highest-trust GC relationships treat outside advisors as "extensions of their operating model" *(KPMG)*. Those are the relationships that survive panel reviews and rate pressure.

HOW TRUSTED ADVISORS RESPOND

Six actions that fit inside the daily interactions you're already having with in-house counsel.

1 Confirm the client's desired outcome

MOST IMPORTANT

SAY IT LIKE THIS

"Based on how we've handled these matters, my read is you're trying to achieve [X]. Is that the goal here — or is there another outcome you're hoping for?"

Assumptions are where long relationships go wrong and where new ones don't get off the ground. Address what you believe to be the client's desired outcome with a statement vs. a question, especially if this is a long-standing client. Showing your read and inviting the correction positions you as a proactive problem-solver and shows flexibility to align with the client's ultimate goal and current business realities.

2 Flag one thing they didn't ask about

SAY IT LIKE THIS

"One more thing on our radar: [an upcoming renewal / a pattern across your smaller matters / a trend we're already helping others address]. Worth a few minutes now, or would it be helpful to book a separate call?"

Your book of business can be an untapped resource for providing additional value to your clients. This is pattern recognition on work you've already done. "We're already helping others with this" — whether that's you, or a colleague at your firm — is a sentence that sets apart trusted advisors.

3 Connect this matter to the last one

SAY IT LIKE THIS

"Last time, on [X], you were worried about [Y] — is that still a concern here?"

Signals continuity of relationship, illustrating a long-term view and positioning you for more than one-off matters.

4 Lead with your recommendation and the benchmark

SAY IT LIKE THIS

"My recommendation is [X]; the trade-off is [cost / speed / risk]. And for a similarly situated company — not your competitor — here's how we handle this, and why."

GCs called "legalistic memoranda" the opposite of what they want. Recommendation first, analysis second. The benchmark is your unique advantage: pattern data across companies that the client cannot get anywhere else.

5 Avoid surprises in the billing cycle

SAY IT LIKE THIS

"Before we staff this phase: what range are you budgeting for it?"

Fee disputes are almost never about size; they're about surprise. A bill 1.5x the number they had in mind erodes trust even when the work was flawless.

6 Talk with your client about their priorities

SAY IT LIKE THIS

"What are your priorities for the back half of the year? If you're pulling your legal budget together, we'll build budgets for the ongoing matters to help you plan."

Asked bare, "what's coming in Q3?" can smell like selling. Anchored to their planning cycle, with the budget offer attached, it's a service.

MAXED OUT? START HERE. Pick **1–3 clients** where you're the face of the relationship and you already have handled multiple matters. Try layering in one to two trusted advisor talking points over a few calls.

Sources: Chambers, "Strategic Legal Advice: How GCs Distinguish Strategic Legal Advice from Subject-Matter Expertise" · Thomson Reuters 2026 Report on the State of the US Legal Market · KPMG 2026 Global General Counsel Outlook.