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Good marketing demands focus, connections

In today's competitive marketplace for legal services, lawyers know that marketing

is vital to their ultimate success. They understand the need to generate new business, raise awareness, cross-sell and retain existing clients, and secure referral

sources. Most lawyers and other service professionals – in large firms or small – are engaged in some form of marketing.

Some seek merely to validate their credentials and reinforce reputation. Others search for substantive leads to feed the client pipeline. Still other lawyers and firms endeavor to weed out certain types of legal work and appeal to a narrower, specific audience.

INTEGRATED MARKETING

While legal professionals are now recognizing that an integrated marketing plan is more effective than any single marketing action item used on its own, many struggle to define which components are best-suited for them.

Some firms "touch" their clients using direct mail, reinforce relationships via annual client retention or business-building events, present a sol-

id web presence and – depending on the budget – undertake a coordinated paid advertising regime. Many attract positive attention through an ongoing public relations effort, announcing firm "news" via press releases and positioning lawyers as experts commenting about their field.

In nearly all cases, one of the most worthwhile marketing endeavors is relationship building. Clients look for lawyers with whom they feel a connection ... either via a business referral, personal tie or other association. They want lawyers who not only understand their business and goals, but are personally invested in their success.

MOTIVATIONS THAT FOCUS

A diverse array of partners usually means an equally diverse set of marketing expectations. However, while litigators may differ from estate planners or banking lawyers about where to shine the marketing spotlight, all have important viewpoints to bring to the table when formulating a focus for marketing activities.

Often, partners see the need to fine tune their marketing goals when faced with the dismal results of wasted marketing dollars. Many firms incorporate the soul-searching exercise of creating a focus into an annual retreat. They don't think much about marketing strategy throughout the year. While retreats are ideal opportunities to examine profitability, assess strength

of professional staff, and look for ways to improve financial performance, the marketing piece may get left behind in the need to scrutinize the numbers.

BEGINNING THE CONVERSATION

The marketing equation always includes budget, size of firm, audience, geographic reach and skill set. One way to begin the conversation about strategic goals is to undertake a mini-assessment of the firm's reputation and capabilities using a SWOT analysis to assess strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Partners might evaluate the firm's position in the marketplace, points of differentiation and other insights on their own. In a perfect world, the partners then gather to brainstorm as a group. Often, a marketing director or facilitator will lead a group discussion that turns out to be truly dynamic.

SEEK CLIENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Combining insightful input from partners with informal, market research from clients and referral sources is often the best way to solidify your key selling points. A simple client questionnaire will help determine the firm's reputation in the community. It will provide valid feedback for amending the firm's marketing messages and spending.

Face-to-face meetings or telephone conversations with clients will generate qualita-

tive, not quantitative, data. If the person asking the questions really knows the firm – as opposed to being a hired gun who has never met the partners or visited the office – clients are, generally, pleased to be included and share meaningful opinions. And, along the way, lawyers may learn about minor blips in the lawyer-client relationship that may easily be addressed.

MARKETING-CENTRIC APPROACH

For lawyers and other professional service firms, it is a challenge to stay watchful of your marketing goals in light of day-to-day workplace demands. However, establishing a firm-wide focus that aligns with your strategic plan will help you spend your limited marketing dollars wisely. Consider year-round marketing meetings to talk about firm-wide marketing initiatives; individual marketing plans for partners and associates to capitalize on personal talents; and client satisfaction surveys to generate priceless feedback. ■

Carolyn Lavin is president of Lavin Marketing Communications. She provides advice and action to professional service firms to help them jump-start their business-building efforts, connect with customers, generate awareness in the community, and train management-level personnel to become strong ambassadors.
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