

Marketing

SALLY J. SCHMIDT ■ SOLUTIONS YOU CAN USE

The Power of Market Research

The marketing activities in which some law firms are engaging were unthinkable just a few years ago. Interactive Web sites, full-blown media campaigns and ancillary products and services are just a few of the creative and sophisticated offerings of late.

Yet still seemingly few law firms engage in market research. Yes, a growing number are implementing client surveys to measure client satisfaction and needs. And client surveys are extremely valuable. But market research techniques should be used more broadly, in conjunction with the design, implementation or measurement of marketing activities.

Seeing the Benefits

There are a number of reasons that market research may be eschewed by law firms. First, there is a perception that it is costly and time-consuming. Second, the results may be seen to either confirm what the lawyers already knew or, worse, run counter to an idea the lawyers really want to implement. Lastly, there are some lawyers who simply don't care what other people think.

But how many times has some-

one in your firm raised the question about the "return on investment" of a symposium or newsletter? Or whether the firm's advertising campaign is producing any results?

The purpose of market research is to help you make better decisions about your marketing programs or activities. It can be used to establish benchmarks, obtain feedback and measure results. Instead of simply diving into a marketing activity, research will help you determine, "What do our *targets* think about this idea?"

Establishing the Methodology

If you're interested in conducting primary research—where the firm collects information related to a specific decision or project—there are two kinds of results you can seek: qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative results are subjective; the methods are used primarily to seek ideas.

Quantitative results can be, as the name implies, quantified; they are helpful in situations when the firm wants to measure results.

There are several questioning methods at your disposal, each with benefits and drawbacks.

Written surveys. Written questionnaires (sometimes administered via Web sites or e-mail) can be done very cost-effectively. They can be sent to large numbers of people, allowing for measurement of responses. Also, they can be returned anonymously, which can be good or bad, depending on the firm's objectives. Written surveys usu-

ally need to include many closed-ended or multiple-choice questions, limiting the amount of "color" you might receive in feedback about a particular topic.

Telephone surveys. Phone surveys can be done relatively quickly, and with a good number of participants. They are typically not expensive. Although you can obtain qualitative responses, phone surveys may lack a depth of information because you can't keep people on the telephone too long.

Personal interviews. This method involves face-to-face meetings with individuals from the target audience. It results in rich, subjective feedback. However, the results often cannot be aggregated well, since the number of respondents is typically low and the results are subjective. Personal interviews usually involve the greatest cost (particularly in terms of time).

Focus groups. A focus group is an exploratory method of research, often used to identify a problem or define parameters for an activity. A moderator leads a group of people in a discussion to distinguish issues or provide ideas. Attending a focus group requires a time commitment on the participants' parts, which can be difficult to obtain, depending on the type of schedules the specific target audience maintains.

Market Research in Action

Your market research methodology for given projects will vary dramatically, depending on the importance of a particular strategy or the potential invest-



Sally J. Schmidt (sallyschmidt@schmidt-marketing.com), President of Schmidt Marketing, Inc., has counseled more than 300 law firm clients over the past 16 years. She was the first president of the Legal Marketing Association.

ment required by an activity. The research can be complex and expensive. However, it can also be quick and informal. Here are examples of how law firms have used market research techniques to make better decisions about their marketing programs.

Plaintiff PI brochure. The marketing director of a personal injury law firm was developing a new capabilities brochure. She was walking through the lobby one day with the paper samples for the brochure cover; she was leaning toward "Curtis Flannel," an expensive and trendy paper. On a whim, she stopped to talk to several clients and showed the samples to them. They thought that Curtis Flannel was the construction paper their kids used in school! She changed her selection and, in the process, saved a lot of money on the brochure.

Business community perceptions. A large firm was interested in learning how its business services were perceived by local decision makers. The firm commissioned a market study that determined the level of awareness for its services, the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the firm and its competitors and which law firms the businesses were currently using for those services. Armed with the results of telephone and written surveys, the firm is now developing a marketing plan to position selected services properly.

Client-friendly site design. A 20-lawyer firm decided to give clients some say in the redesign of its Web site. After the site's graphics and layout were done—but before the site went live—the firm sent a link to selected clients and asked for feedback about ease of use, content and graphics. Clients provided several useful comments that were incorporated into the final design.

New office location. A multioffice law firm was planning to branch out

into a new city where the firm wasn't all that familiar with the legal market and players. It commissioned a telephone survey of potential clients to learn which law firms those businesses were using and what rates they were paying to the local competition. With results in hand, the firm was able to establish itself quickly in the new market.

Electronic newsletter. A defense firm was thinking of eliminating the printing costs on its regular insurance and tort newsletter by posting the newsletter to its Web site. At its regular insurance seminar, the firm wisely decided to include a question on its program survey, asking clients if they would access the newsletter electronically. The firm found out that only about one-third of the clients had Internet access at work. Obviously, the newsletter would not

have reached its intended audience if simply posted to the Web site.

Making Well-Informed Choices

Market research can be simple and inexpensive, or it can be complex and costly. It depends on the methodology used and the magnitude of the decision to be made. In all instances, though, remember that most marketing activities involve choices about resources—money or lawyer time. A mistake in judgment can be costly, embarrassing or worse.

There's a logical way to avoid making marketing mistakes. Whether you're hosting a seminar, advertising on public television, starting a new service or creating a new pricing technique, use market research to find out what people think. ■