

Marketing

Aligning Marketing Materials with Business Development

SALLY J. SCHMIDT | Recently I received an invitation to a seminar on effective sales materials for another industry. What intrigued me about the invitation was this claim: "As much as 40 percent of a typical sales rep's time can be spent creating presentations, customizing messaging, and getting ready to engage the customer, while up to 80 percent of the collateral that marketing creates never sees the light of day."

While I'm not sure about the percentages, I believe a similar problem with marketing collateral exists in the legal profession. Law firms typically have standard marketing materials, such as brochures, lawyer bios and Web sites. But in order for a lawyer to make a proper pitch for business, he or she often needs to develop a more effective, better targeted presentation.

Why is it that marketing materials do not adequately "sell" a law firm? In short, most law firm marketing materials are not effective because they do not reflect what is important to the reader—meaning the prospective client.



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Walking in the Client's Shoes: What Resonates?

Students of marketing learn early about "features" and "benefits." As a law firm, the features of your product are things like the size of the firm, when it was founded, and the "what" of what you do (such as labor and employment law, condemnation, contracts or the like). Most buyers, however, are not interested in features; they are interested in benefits. Benefits tell a buyer why the features are useful or important. For a law firm, these could be things like saving time, saving money or getting someone out of trouble.

Let's imagine you are seeking a contractor to build your home—a very personal, important and expensive purchase. When you evaluate the messages of the various home builders you might hire, what kind of information are you looking for? I expect you are most interested in learning how many homes they have built in your price range and who

they built them for. You probably want to know the kinds of materials, finishes or appliances used. Most likely you will want to walk through a few homes to see firsthand the material and quality of the builder's workmanship.

Now imagine you are hiring a lawyer for tax and estate planning—a very personal, important and expensive service. What do you want to know? Probably the credentials of the lawyers and how experienced they are in doing this kind of work. You likely would request the names of some references (or better yet, have received a referral from a trusted source). You most likely also want information on the kinds of results the lawyers have been able to obtain for similar clients (for example, tax savings).

When a law firm says, "We offer everything from simple wills to complex trusts," it's like a home builder advertising, "We build houses with kitchens and bathrooms." It simply doesn't resonate with the buyer.

Getting in Sync with Needs: Seven Steps

So what can you do to align your marketing messages with what's important to your audience? Here are some thoughts and suggestions.

1 Highlight your distinctive competencies. Each piece of marketing material (whether physical or electronic) should be designed to distinguish you or your firm from your competitors, as well as to help clients understand why you are a better choice.

2 Explain why your features are important to clients. Before you note that your firm was founded in 1930, ask yourself what relevance that has to a client. Before you mention that your firm has 80 lawyers, ask yourself why that is important to clients. Finish every sentence by saying to yourself, “And that is important because...,” and then include that benefit in your materials. For example, some clients may think that 80 lawyers is a lot; others may think that it’s unimpressive. Why do you think it’s important—because it conveys depth and bench strength, or access to partners? Spell it out in your materials.

3 Remember that pictures speak louder than words. Showing something instead of saying it will make a greater impression on a reader. For example, instead of talking about your firm’s diversity, take a group photo. Instead of writing about teamwork, include a picture of the team. If you have had great results for clients, distill the results into a bar chart or graph. And if your process is what sets you apart, develop a timeline or Gantt chart to share with prospects.

4 Highlight credentials. Most clients have no way to gauge how smart or effective a lawyer is, or whether he or she is better than the next. One way to provide assurance is to highlight the credentials of your firm’s lawyers. Keep in mind, however, that many lawyers’ “credentials” are not compelling. Simply having gone to law school or having a membership in the ABA are basic expectations. For an appellate

lawyer, an impressive credential would be “Fellow, American Academy of Appellate Lawyers.” For a construction litigator, a notable activity would be “Member, Legislative Committee, Associated General Contractors of America.”

5 Focus on results. When all is said and done, prospective clients want to know how you’ve helped other, similar clients. If your jurisdiction’s rules of professional conduct permit, tally up the cases you’ve had and use numbers—for example, “Our experience in handling 90 jury trials in this area is unmatched.” Ask clients to serve as references, and provide names and phone numbers to prospects. Create lists of representative matters or cases (with client permission), or describe the outcomes—such as “Obtained reversal of multimillion-dollar punitive damage award.”

6 Don’t forget the importance of form. While the substance and message are the primary focus of the suggestions in this column, the form of your materials is important, too. They should be easy to read, with plenty of white space. Content should be well organized from general to specific. Where possible, use bullets instead of full sentences. In addition, highlight and distinguish sections of the material with clear headings or subheadings as well as boldface type. If you are preparing written materials such as a response to a request for proposal, include a table of contents and tabs to make it easy for the reader to find the information of interest.

7 Customize when possible. Lastly, even when you have distinctive and well-organized marketing materials, you will frequently benefit from customization. If you are visiting with a prospective client in the energy industry, for example, your representative cases and clients as well as your outside credentials should be salient to that industry.

The Punch Comes from the Perspective

It isn’t that difficult to write good, effective marketing materials if you simply look at your firm and its services from the client’s point of view. Of course, you should also check the rules of professional conduct in your jurisdiction to ensure you are not creating expectations or in violation of any particular rules. When you take the time to align your messages with your clients’ and prospects’ needs, more of your efforts are sure to see the light of day. ¹⁸

Resources

- Business Development for Lawyers: Strategies for Getting and Keeping Clients* by Sally J. Schmidt. ALM, 2006.
- The Lawyer’s Guide to Marketing Your Practice*, 2nd Edition, edited by James A. Durham and Deborah McMurray. ABA, 2004. Visit www.ababooks.org to order and to view 13 chapters available for download.
- The Law Marketing Portal, www.lfmi.com.