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Creating Communities Through Affinity Marketing

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American Airlines announced to great fanfare recently that the company has created a section on its website specifically for women. On it, there will be information and advice for women travellers, and an opportunity for them to weigh in on travel-related issues. This is just one example of how companies increasingly are targeting what are commonly called "affinity groups," i.e., groups of people who

have some kind of affinity or predisposition toward a specific subject matter, theme, belief or lifestyle.

The media—magazines or cable television stations, for example—provide another good illustration of the focus on affinity groups. For magazines, examples of targets include people who like to cook, those who ride motorcycles or those who collect buttons. Likewise, insurance companies are finding growth niches by focusing on affinity groups, from religious groups to McDonald's franchisees.

On a more personal level, there's an explosion of interest in creating communities of people with common interests. The evidence includes MySpace sites and the growth of blogs. The goal of "affinity marketing" is to create a connection between users and the companies trying to reach them. In addition to providing a target market with specific information of interest, this approach allows the firm, product or service to differentiate itself. It is apparent

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that efforts to focus marketing efforts in this manner can pay off.

Law-related Affinity Programs

A similar approach can be very effective for law firms. Many of the traditional tools or techniques used by law firms are appropriate for affinity marketing, including seminars and webinars, roundtables, blogs, websites and publications (electronic or hard copy).

The goal of the activity should be to get the members of the affinity group or community engaged. Engagement increases loyalty. For example, Amazon, which has been very successful in creating a loyal user base, does this by inviting users to review the books they read.

In some instances, the affinity group may be organized to focus on substantive legal issues. For example, one firm developed an electronic bulletin board for local HR managers to share questions and best practices. The firm, which controlled the list, was able to block out other lawyer participants and, more importantly, weigh in on legal issues as they arose.

Another law firm created a regular roundtable forum for franchisees in his community. They met regularly to talk about their common issues and concerns in dealing with franchisors. The lawyer hosted the meetings in his offices.

And one mid-sized firm, for which a substantial percentage of its clientele represented closely held businesses, hosts a regular forum for family-owned businesses. The owners of client businesses participate in a confidential forum facilitated by a family business counsellor, paid for by the firm. No one from the firm is present during the discussions, which are followed by a reception with the lawyers.

Non-legal Affinity Groups

There are also many opportunities for law firms to develop communities or affinity groups in areas that have nothing to do with the law, an idea that is just starting to take off. For example, in the US, the NCAA basketball tournament is wildly popular; in fact, studies have shown the productivity of American businesses drops significantly during the first week of the tournament.

One law firm engages its clients and good referral sources in several NCAA tournament activities. They are invited to fill out their brackets with their predictions on the firm's website, which are compiled into a huge pool. On the first day of the tournament, the firm hosts an event for all the participants at a local sports bar/restaurant. As scores come in, the firm sends out e-mails, updates the brackets and communicates the standings to everyone. It has nothing to do with the law, but has been very successful in creating a way to connect people to the firm.

What are some other ideas for affinity marketing?

- Wine: A firm might create a wine club comprised of clients and good referral sources. It could set up and host organized tastings once a month—and maybe even an annual trip to a wine country.
- Reading: The firm could start a book club, with monthly meetings to discuss the selections. It could also host periodic book signings by local authors, or start a blog to review new releases.
- Travel: Spending two weeks in Asia with good clients and their families, or a weekend in a ski resort with good referral sources, will provide more than relationship-building

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opportunities; it will create shared experiences.

- Golf: Instead of just hosting an annual golf tournament, this would involve a sustained effort, such as setting up a golf league with targeted people and perhaps other activities, such as a league-sponsored charity tournament or a fantasy golf league.

Depending on the area of interest and the firm's commitment, an affinity marketing effort could include a wide range of activities, from screensavers, weekly e-mails and RSS feeds to regular meetings, a blog and member surveys.

Conclusion

Affinity groups have proven to build loyalty among users, so it would be worthwhile for a law firm to consider the idea. Keep in mind, however, that the keys to good affinity marketing efforts are to:

- Get the target group engaged. For example, it is important to invite people from outside the firm to be involved in organizing the effort.
- Minimize the perceived role of the firm. The firm's participants should be no more visible than other members of the group.
- Maintain the homogeneousness of the group or the commonness of the interest. Whatever the focus, it needs to be a passion for the members of the group.

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