

Good Ideas for Marketing Any Size Law Firm

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What works and what doesn't work in law firm marketing? The success or failure of any business development idea will depend on the lawyer, the practice, the execution, the target audience, the timing and other factors. Still, in my 18 years of working with the legal profession, I have found that the following activities are always good ideas for virtually any size law firm. While the specifics of implementation will vary based on firm size, as well as location, practice and clientele, the basic concepts remain sound for all.

Send Client Alerts

According to client feedback, the marketing material that recipients consider most useful is a short, timely update on a topic of relevance to them. In other words, "Something happened, and this is how it affects *you*." Client alerts need to be very current, focused and targeted. Depending on the audience and the specific issue, the alert might be e-mailed, faxed or mailed. Most importantly, it must tell people why this issue is important and what they should do about it.

Require Visits to Clients

There is nothing like a client visit to build goodwill and demonstrate con-



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cern. If you work with institutional clients, tour their offices, plants or construction sites. While you're there, visit with people you normally don't get to meet. Or put on a seminar in the client's workplace. Your firm might even consider whether it makes sense to have a part-time office in the client's facility. For individuals, such as tax or estate planning clients, good old-fashioned house calls are very well received.

Give Special Treatment to Your Most Important Clients

Most law firms have a few clients who are extremely important to the firm. Losing those clients would be devastating, because of the financial impact, loss of prestige, effect on a particular practice area or the like. Yet often firms take an "equal opportunity" approach to all their client relations activities.

Send red-hot issue updates. Involve clients in charting your firm's future. Reward staff for excellence in client relations. And never, ever disregard the importance of the telephone. Here are seven marketing ideas that work for firms large and small.

Instead, you should identify and create programs for your most important clients. For example, some firms have a client advisory board to give key clients input into the firm's direction and decisions. Other firms create client plans that outline what steps the firm will take to maintain and expand those important relationships. Some firms organize specific events to recognize and thank good clients. And still others establish regular meetings (such as annual visits) with special clients for the purpose of talking about the relationship—past, present and future.

Implement a "Voice of the Client" Program

Marketing-savvy firms implement programs to solicit client feedback. By consulting with clients, you obtain an enormous amount of information—from their satisfaction with the firm to their perceptions of your strengths and weaknesses, from their reactions to your marketing efforts to their criteria for hiring lawyers. This feedback can help you identify new business opportunities as well as improve client satisfaction levels.

How often you solicit feedback and the method you employ—face-to-face interviews, phone calls or written surveys—will depend on your practice and your clients. For example, a litigator with an out-of-town client may conduct a "post-project" phone interview after the case is settled. A residential real estate lawyer may send a written survey after each closing. But keep in mind that if you ask for client input, you must be prepared to act on it.

Make the Telephone a Top Priority

I often ask lawyers this question: "When dealing with your clients, what percentage of your contact is done by telephone?" Answers have ranged from

a low of 70 percent to, more frequently, 90 percent or higher. The telephone is the most important point of access for clients. Yet many firms don't give this access point the attention that they should.

Clients want lawyers who are responsive and accessible. In firms that embrace these service values, lawyers change outgoing voice-mail messages daily to reflect their schedules. Lawyers and staff work together closely to monitor calls and return them promptly. Lawyers have—and use—their own direct-dial extensions. And both lawyers and staff receive training in client relations and phone skills.

Include Everyone in Your Efforts

Everyone in the firm—lawyers, secretaries, receptionists, messengers, accounts receivable personnel, all up and down the line—plays an important role in developing good client relationships. You should include both lawyers and staff in marketing and client service efforts, whether it means formally assigning staff members to client teams or including them in client tours. Try providing recognition for outstanding efforts, perhaps by giving client service awards.

Organize Around Your Clients

Lastly, most law firms are focused internally—they are structured to reflect their own needs and issues. Practice groups, for example, are set up to align with substantive legal areas, such as real estate, tax, corporate and litigation.

Instead, why not organize the firm around your clients? This could take the form of cross-disciplinary niche or industry practice teams, such as communications, agribusiness, family-owned business or hospitality. Or it could take the form of client-specific teams, putting together a cross-disci-

plinary group of lawyers and staff who, for example, handle matters for XYZ Corporation. (See "Get Going in Segment Marketing" on page 24 of this issue.)

Your To-Do: Ask the Right Questions

As you make decisions about how to implement these or other marketing activities, make sure the firm answers the following questions to best focus its efforts:

- **Who are we targeting?** A human resources manager is a very different target from a general counsel.
- **What information do they need?** Different clients have different information needs and levels of sophistication.
- **What medium will be most effective?** Some clients like newsletters, others prefer seminars, still others like online media.
- **With whom are we competing for our targets' attention?** If 10 law firms in your market already produce environmental newsletters, consider another tool.
- **How will we follow up?** One contact will rarely produce results. ■

ACTION

- *Marketing the Law Firm: Business Development Techniques* by Sally J. Schmidt. Law Journal Press, updated semi-annually.
- *The Complete Guide to Marketing Your Law Practice*, edited by Hollis Hatfield Weishar and James A. Durham. American Bar Association, 1999.
- "Getting Client Input: What's the Point?" Law Marketing Portal, October 2000. www.lfmi.com/news/schmidtsurveys.cfm.
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