

Law Firm Brochures: They're Here to Stay

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Recently a lawyer called to discuss his firm's practice development program. After patiently listening to an explanation of marketing and its virtues, he had but one question: "Do you do brochures?"

Over the past few years, firm brochures have been the subject of much discussion and debate among those in the legal profession. Many communications professionals find it interesting, and somewhat amusing, that such a simple marketing device can be so controversial — but controversial it is.

One reason may be that brochures run contrary to the "old school" approach to client development (and, of course, were considered unethical until quite recently). Another reason may be that results or benefits — to the bottom line, that is — are difficult to measure. For yet another, most law firms don't do brochures very well, providing opponents with many excellent examples to fortify their position.

But while some have suggested that brochures are just a passing trend for law firms, I believe they are here to stay for one simple reason: As law firms continue to develop more systematic and aggressive programs to target and develop clients, they will require more formal and sophisticated marketing tools, including brochures.

Purposes of a Brochure

Many lawyers have unrealistic expectations of what a brochure will do. It would be highly unlikely, for example, that a new client would be generated solely as a result of reading a brochure. It just doesn't happen that way. So what can you expect from a brochure?

First, brochures are basically sales tools. They are hands-on pieces that can be left with clients or prospective clients and, if done well, summarize the essence of your firm. Second, they are communication vehicles. A brochure is a much more memorable way of providing information about the firm's practice than verbal descriptions or typed letters because it uses both visual and verbal techniques.

Third, brochures can increase the frequency of contact with a client or prospect. It is one more way of circulating the firm's name (and logo, if appropriate) to people and places that may otherwise be difficult to reach. Fourth, using a brochure will ensure that the firm is described in a consistent and complete fashion. It is easy for those lawyers in one department, for example, to communicate the depth of their practice — but perhaps to the

exclusion of other departments in the firm. Finally and maybe most importantly, a brochure will help a firm build an identity and generate awareness of its "personality" as well as its capabilities.

Unfortunately, most law firm brochures have difficulty achieving even these basic communications objectives. The problems seem to stem from four major misunderstandings or mistakes.

1. The message must be distinctive, communicating what makes the firm different. The lawyers need to make an honest appraisal of what the firm does and does not do before describing the firm's practice. The "we do everything for everyone" message found in so many law firms' brochures does nothing to differentiate them from their competitors.
2. Most firm brochures are focused internally: "We do litigation; we have 50 lawyers; we have six offices . . ." These features are virtually meaningless to a prospective client unless they somehow provide a direct benefit to that client as well.
3. A brochure will not be effective unless it is done in conjunction with other marketing activities. Will there be client functions at which it can be displayed? Will the firm mail copies to referral sources? Are there opportunities for lawyers to use the brochure in a non-contrived setting, and are the lawyers encouraged to do so?
4. Any communication vehicle needs to be targeted. If a firm tries to do too many things with one brochure, such as using it as a recruiting piece, a request for referrals, and a pitch for prospective clients, the message may become so broad and confusing as to be lost on all the audiences.

Getting Started

Putting these common problems aside, if a firm has decided it would like to produce a brochure, the following are essential steps in achieving a successful end product.



ILLUSTRATION BY STEVE CLEMENT

Before you begin you need:

- *Approval of the top people in the firm.* If the management committee or founding partners are not in favor of the project, and therefore do not participate in its execution, it will not result in an accurate portrayal of the firm (and probably won't get done).
- *Deadlines and delegation.* Marketing projects go on the back burner whenever the legal practice heats up, as they should. But someone must have responsibility for seeing that the brochure gets done, and this often means foregoing the participation of a great number of individuals.
- *A clear understanding of the purpose.* Identify in advance how you wish to use the brochure, who the audience is, what you would like to communicate, and how you will measure whether the effort was successful.

As you proceed, you should:

- *Survey the lawyers.* At the very least, survey the partners in the firm to get their ideas on how the firm and individual practice areas should be portrayed. They may also have suggestions for using the final product.
- *Describe benefits, not features.* For example: "We have an office in Eden Prairie" points out a feature. "Our Eden Prairie office allows our clients in the western suburbs to visit our lawyers in a convenient and easily accessible location" describes a benefit.
- *Keep the language simple.* Some law firm brochures look like legal dictionaries — from administrative law to zoning. Avoid legal jargon and keep the message clear and to the point.
- *Avoid cutting corners.* As with most things in life, you get what you pay for. The major expenses associated with a brochure are for the design and printing. A professional design and high-quality printing job will combine to create a distinctive image

through the use of logos, type styles, paper and layout.

- *Focus on one or two things.* There is an adage which says that 80 percent of what you say in a brochure, your competitors say, too. So it is essential to feature those items which truly distinguish your firm from others. Decide how you will approach the content: Will you feature attorneys, specialties, offices, experience, client base or cases? You can't do it all.

Circulating Your Brochure

When completed, depending on its content, there are many ways to use a brochure. You may consider:

1. Sending it to referral sources (accountants, bankers, brokers, etc.) with a letter of introduction or thanks;
2. Giving it to existing clients, to describe for them services or practice areas they may not currently utilize;
3. Bringing it to all firm-sponsored functions such as luncheons or seminars;
4. Including it with proposals;
5. Having attorneys bring it to any presentations or speeches they make; and
6. Leaving it with prospective clients after face-to-face meetings.

A firm may encounter a number of other questions when developing its brochure. First, should it include photography? As a general rule, pictures help to break up the monotony of the printed message, and can make the brochure more visually appealing. However, they add substantially to the cost, and if limited to shots of "men at work," do not justify the added expenditure.

Should lawyers write the brochure? Regardless of who is involved, it is best to limit the writing assignment to as few individuals as possible. At the very least, have a non-lawyer serve as editor. Many firms find that by using an outside writer, the brochure will avoid the traps of being too introverted or containing legal jargon.

Should the firm do a brochure at all? Certainly there are less costly alternatives, and a firm should not develop a brochure simply because other firms have one. After the brochure is written, it could be put into the firm's word processing equipment to be used and tailored as needed. Of course, it would lack the visual appeal of the printed version.

Finally, how much information should be included? The shelf life of a brochure is only 18 months to two years, so you should not avoid putting in details for fear they will become dated. At the same time, if there is some information that is likely to change (including attorney names), you may wish to consider including it in more flexible pieces, such as inserts.

Every firm should have something in writing that describes the firm in a broad and consistent fashion. Even firms that are determined not to have a brochure should go through the exercise of writing one. Most firms will benefit from a printed brochure, however, because the importance of image in professional service firms today cannot be overemphasized, and brochures, as with any printed communications tool, can contribute greatly to image.

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