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# Marketing The Small Law Firm

By Sally J. Schmidt

Small law firms face unique opportunities and challenges in their marketing efforts. On the positive side, recent studies indicate that size is of relatively little importance to clients in selecting a law firm; it is expertise which they seek. In addition, many smaller firms are able to provide services more cost-effectively than larger firms, and this is fast becoming a major issue to clients of all sizes.

Marketing a small firm is not without its disadvantages, however. Some clients simply feel that bigger is better. Others think they need the "horses" of a big firm. Still others find it less risky to choose a large firm; if something goes wrong, their decision to hire one of the biggest firms in town rarely will be brought into question.

One factor remains most important in discussing marketing for a small law firm, however: Perception. The perception of a lawyer's expertise remains the most important factor to clients, both corporate and individual, in selecting outside counsel.

## Creating a Perception of Expertise

The primary marketing goal for lawyers in small firms should be to position themselves to attract the clients they want by creating a perception of specialized expertise. This expertise or "specialty" can be focused:

- o By practice area, such as tax-related litigation or securities law
- o By industry, such as health care or financial services
- o By type of client, such as small businesses or not-for-profit entities
- o By type of representation, such as working with troubled companies or solving disputes in any available forum (e.g., litigation, arbitration, mediation, preventive counselling, etc.)

In developing this area of expertise, two comments are of note:

(1) The specialization does not need to be done by the firm as a whole; each lawyer should try to develop this perception, however.

(2) The specialty practice or area of expertise may not represent the lawyer's entire practice; for example, a lawyer can be very successful in developing a perception of expertise, and business, in an area even if it is just one of many things that lawyer does.

## Targeting Potential Clients

Once the area of focus or expertise has been determined, the lawyers must position themselves to come into contact with people needing those legal services. This involves identifying: (1) The direct decision-makers for the work (e.g., in-house counsel, human resource directors, entrepreneurs, etc.); and, (2) Others who may have the opportunity to refer this work (e.g., accountants, bank loan officers, environmental engineers, etc.).

Once identified, it becomes easy to determine how the lawyers can make contacts with these individuals. What organizations or associations do they turn to for education or networking? What publications do they read? The lawyers then can take steps to become visible in these forums, through activity, articles, presentations, advertisements, or a number of other vehicles.

In trying to develop these targeted groups, keep in mind the following:

- o Organizational activity is a necessity. The lawyers must be active and visible participants in groups which they are targeting, whether contractors, mortgage bankers, or women business owners. There is little value to "firm" memberships in developing business; individual lawyers must use the organization to develop credibility and relationships.

- o Traditional professional activities, such as speaking, writing and teaching, are excellent ways to build credibility and demonstrate the lawyers' expertise. For example, if a lawyer "wrote the book" on an area of law, he or she certainly will make the "short list" of most prospective clients.

- o Firm promotional activities can be very valuable in developing awareness for the firm and its expertise. Newsletters, substantive updates and seminars are considered by most clients to be useful in helping them stay abreast of issues which may affect them. Brochures should describe the benefits which the firm brings to clients or referral sources in the areas being targeted.

- o Building good networks is a must for small firms. Most clients will not believe that a small firm can do everything well. Therefore, it is critical that the lawyers develop relationships with other service providers which supplement or complement their own capabilities. These networks will help the lawyers expand the range of services which they can provide clients while overcoming some objections which prospects may raise, and can be done informally or formally.

## The Role of the Administrator

In smaller firms, the likelihood of having a marketing director or coordinator is slim. Many of these responsibilities therefore fall to the firm administrator. There are many things which an administrator can do to contribute to the effectiveness and momentum of a marketing program, depending on the time available. These include:

(1) Collect marketing-related information. There is a great deal of information which will help the firm understand its marketing opportunities and results. For example, where does the firm's business come from? Other information the administrator might collect includes: financial data on clients; industry data; practice area revenue; etc.

(2) Educate the lawyers. By routing marketing-related information to the lawyers on a regular basis, administrators can help the lawyers better understand marketing. This might include: client data; surveys of law firms; articles on

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marketing; information on competitive activities; etc. This can be done through an in-house newsletter, memos or meetings.

(3) Develop a mailing list. A good mailing list is critical for a good marketing program. The administrator can start with the client list and, working with the secretaries, begin to put together a mailing list which is capable of being sorted by attorney, type of client, etc.

(4) Organize a lawyer database. Depending on the size of the firm, it can be very useful to have information readily available about the lawyers. Using Martindale-Hubbell or West Legal Directory listings, the administrator can start a simple database which can be sorted by area of expertise, school attended, outside activities, etc.

(5) Oversee the firm's image. It is important that the firm convey a consistent identity. The administrator can take responsibility for ensuring this by monitoring signage, stationery, brochures, mailings, advertisements, etc.

(6) Facilitate the lawyers' efforts. In the absence of a marketing coordinator, the administrator can assist the lawyers with the implementation of certain projects (e.g., seminars) or in keeping them on track.

(7) Monitor the marketing budget. Many law firms don't really know what they spend on marketing. Administrators can aggregate all the marketing-related items (e.g., directory listings, entertainment, advertisements, etc.) and develop a marketing budget.

(8) Train the staff in client relations. The staff plays a very large role in providing service and developing relationships with clients, particularly in smaller firms. Administrators should make certain staff members aware of these responsibilities and trained to do them well.

(9) Hire and coordinate outside resources. Without a marketing coordinator, the administrator can serve as a liaison to public relations agencies, printers, research firms, consultants, graphic designers and other marketing-related vendors.

(10) Keep marketing on the front burner. The administrator can make sure that marketing becomes a regular part of the firm's way of doing business by organizing meetings, adding marketing to meeting agendas, or keeping the discussions alive.

## Conclusion

Marketing can be done, and done very effectively, by small firms. The following tips may ensure that the firm receives the biggest bang for its marketing buck:

- o Don't try to do too much. With limited financial and human resources, it is important to focus your efforts.

- o Be a big fish in a small pond. Pool your resources in the places they will make the biggest impact.

- o Stick with your programs. Don't change your plans or activities just because they are not successful

immediately. Much success comes over time through reinforcement.

- o Use professionals to help you. Seek the advice of professionals in areas where you do not have expertise, such as designing a brochure or a client survey.

- o See all your marketing activities from the client's point of view. In designing Yellow Pages ads, for example, many law firms use the firm name as the heading, in large bold print. What does that tell a client? Clients want to know what benefit the firm can bring them (e.g., free consultation, no fees unless there is recovery, convenient parking, etc.).

- o Put your plan in writing. It is simply more likely to get done.

- o Remember: The firm needs institutional marketing activities in order to create name recognition and visibility, but developing business requires individual initiative. A firm seminar, for example, will not be successful in generating new clients if the lawyers fail to follow up with the attendees.

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