

# Market the firm with customer service: three low-cost tactics

As competition among law firms continues to heighten, the key to retaining clients is fast becoming customer service, says law firm marketing consultant **SALLY J. SCHMIDT**.

The business of law has been a buyer's market for a long time. "And clients are beginning to recognize that."

Schmidt is president of Schmidt Marketing, a law firm marketing consulting firm located in Burnsville, MN.

She cites three ways to raise the firm's customer service level. All three are low-cost and easy to accomplish.

## SEND OUT BUSINESS BULLETINS

The first approach is to send periodic bulletins or advisories to the clients telling about new developments, changes in the law, and news that affects their business or industry.

Informative bulletins "are extremely well received," she says. "Clients want to know the firm is on the cutting edge and is keeping them apprised of new developments."

Focus the bulletins on a specific readership. "Don't send them to too broad an audience" but to clients in a particular practice area such as employment law or intellectual property.

The attorneys in that practice area compile the information that they believe will be of value to those clients.

But the bulletin should not cite cases, she says. It should be practical – things the clients can use to improve their business.

She also cautions not to use the bulletin to sell the

firm's services. Instead, tell the clients "this is what's happening, this is what you need to know, and this is what you need to do about it."

Write it like a regular letter with the information in bullet form. The sentences should be short, concise, and phrased as direct commands.

And include the necessary disclaimers, she adds – that the information is not legal advice for specific situations.

Mail a bulletin to the same readership at least once a year. "And if the information is particularly timely, either fax it or send it through e-mail."

## HOLD STAY-OUT-OF-TROUBLE SEMINARS

The second way to improve the firm's customer service is to offer to hold free workshops at the clients' places of business.

Focus the workshops squarely on the clients' needs, such as giving advice on how to stay out of trouble with the Americans With Disabilities Act or how to avoid potential charges of sexual harassment or discrimination.

The workshops should last an hour to an hour and a half.

And like the bulletins, to be successful, they have to provide useable information. It's also a good idea to give handouts such as a list of tips or a summary of what was said.

Free workshops build trust, because they show that the firm cares about its clients.

They also give the firm an opportunity to get new types of business from the current clients. For exam-

ple, the firm might hold a workshop on employment law for one of its corporate clients.

Schmidt recommends holding at least one workshop a year for each major client group.

## SET UP LUNCHEON ROUNDTABLES

The third customer service activity is to invite clients to the firm for a luncheon roundtable.

The object is to assemble clients in one specialty area to discuss current issues and developments that affect their business.

The discussions should have a theme, perhaps a new development in estate planning that affects the banking or investment business.

Like the workshops, they should last an hour to an hour and a half. Schedule them a month ahead of time, hold them in the office conference room, and provide lunch.

The discussions allow the clients to share their experiences, problems, and solutions. People in the same business "like to interact with each other," Schmidt says.

From a marketing standpoint, they demonstrate that the firm has other significant clients, and that gives the firm credibility.

But the most important result is that the attorneys will get insight into the services they need to offer those clients.

## AND FOUR GOLDEN RULES

Before a customer service plan can work, however, the firm has to follow four golden rules of marketing, Schmidt says.

The first is to be responsive. "I know one law firm that actually puts in writing that all client phone calls will be returned the same day."

The second is to be personally accessible. She cites one firm that sends its major clients a directory with the lawyers' direct business and home telephone numbers.

"They're in the phone book anyway, but that shows the firm is taking the initiative."

The third rule is to forget the old marketing adage that "one size fits all." Don't try to make one bulletin, one workshop, or one roundtable discussion fit all the clients.

To have an effective marketing program, the firm has to treat its client groups individually, because their issues are different.

"And if you can only do it for one group, do it for the largest segment of the business."

The fourth rule is to be sincere. Listen to the clients – even if it means hearing criticism.

"Don't try to gloss problems over. Clients know a sales job when they see it." ❖