

Marketing

SALLY J. SCHMIDT ■ SOLUTIONS YOU CAN USE

An Idea That Works: Organize Around Your Clients

In the spirit of the “Good Idea!” theme, I put on my special thinking cap to come up with the subject of this month’s column. As I batted about possible strategies and activities to cover, it occurred to me that good ideas aren’t necessarily new ideas, or bold ideas, or even particularly exciting ideas. They are ideas that work.

Yet it seems that law firms are often distracted by the hot “new” marketing phenomenon—sales, branding, competitive intelligence, chief marketing officers, client relationship management systems. There are always marketing “flavors of the month.” Some quickly fade from view, while others are (and always have been) important pieces of an overall marketing strategy. But to paraphrase the moral of the fable of the tortoise and the hare, victory in marketing comes to those who implement and *sustain* important fundamental programs.



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My good idea is to organize your firm around your clients. Not in practice groups or even industry teams—but rather in client teams with client-specific programs and initiatives.

Identifying Your Firm’s Key Clients: The Way to Loyalty

Most law firms have some very important relationships. For corporate and commercial law firms, this might be a handful of clients who contribute significant, ongoing revenue. For firms with episodic clients, this might be referral sources who feed the firm a steady stream of business. Essentially, the notion is to identify your important relationships and build a program around those relationships to ensure satisfaction and loyalty.

Remember, loyalty and satisfaction are two different things. In a remarkable finding reported in *The Loyalty Effect: The Hidden Force Behind Growth, Profits and Lasting Value* (Harvard Business School Press, 1996), between 65 and 85 percent of people who had defected from a particular service provider said they were actually satisfied or very satisfied with the services performed by the firm.

To ensure loyalty, a firm needs to be more *intentional* about building its relationships. To do so, you must begin by identifying those clients who are key to your success. Frequently, these clients match the following criteria:

- Have work in a number of different substantive areas (or the potential for this)
- Have relationships with a number of different people (or the potential for this)
- Use the firm year in and year out for their legal work
- Are good sources of referrals or recommendations
- Provide annual revenues that would be hard to replace

Building a Key Client Program: Team Strategies

Once you have identified your firm’s most important relationships, you need to think about activities to ensure their future with your firm. Here are strategies to consider.

Client teams. Create an official “ABC Manufacturing” team, for example, which includes lawyers from all the substantive areas used—or needed—by the client. Include members of the staff as appropriate—secretaries, paralegals and even administrative people. If it’s a technology client, you might include your IT person; if it’s a large employer, you might include your HR manager.

Team meetings. Have the official team meet on a regular basis. Use your meetings to discuss everything related to the client. Ask, Where do we stand on projects? What news have we heard about the client? Have any people come or gone? What problems have we faced? Are there

specific guidelines, procedures or requirements (billing, status reporting or the like) we need to follow?

Again, include staff in the meetings. And think about including the client from time to time. The client can see how you've organized to serve its needs, and it can offer perspective and educate the team about the business or industry.

Client team charts. Put together a team directory or organizational chart that outlines for the client the primary contact, the backup lawyers or contact lawyers in other substantive areas, and the legal assistants and secretaries involved. Provide direct-dial numbers and e-mail addresses for all. Also include other numbers the client might need at the firm, such as the accounts receivable department, to make it easy to do business with you.

Client plans. Develop an annual plan that sets out what the firm's representatives will do to keep the client happy. This might include an annual social event between the two organizations, in-house workshops or seminars, and regular contacts or entertainment. Consider matching the firm's people up with client representatives, so no one falls through the cracks.

Relationship meetings. Ask the client to spend some time with you on a regular basis (no charge, of course) to talk about the relationship—how things are going, what you might do better and additional ways you could help. For some clients, this might take the form of a monthly breakfast meeting; for others, it might be a more formal annual meeting including various representatives of the company. The bottom line is to *listen*.

Client annual reports. Prepare a report each year showing client representatives what they receive by virtue of their relationship with you. Outline

the projects, cases or matters that were handled. Summarize the results, especially major ones. Recap the fees that were paid. And mention any "value-added" services the client received (introductions to a venture capital company, on-site seminars and so forth).

Exchanges. Ask to put your lawyers through the client's training program. Invite the client to attend your in-house CLE programs. Have a lawyer work on site at the client's place of business, or even invite a client representative to intern at your firm.

Technology. Find ways to add value while binding clients to the firm by sharing documents and information. Host a client extranet. Give clients real-time access to their bills. Or

develop a master database of their intellectual property or similar assets.

Keeping the Ball Rolling: Use Your Imagination

Once you focus on it, it's hard not to think of good ideas for getting closer to clients.

- Get on the distribution list for their in-house or employee newsletters.
- Go to their board or annual meetings.
- Take a tour of their business facilities (and bring along the staff).
- Show off their products and services in your offices.
- Attend an industry meeting with them.

There are a host of possibilities. What's *your* good idea? LP