

How to Move Past Promotion for Your Law Firm

When law firms first began to develop marketing programs the focus was largely on communications and promotion, and their efforts focused on such activities as seminars, media relations and newsletters. They bore little resemblance to the corporate marketing model, with its heavy emphasis on research and product or service development and delivery. The law firm marketing focus was on visibility and had little influence on firm management decision-making.

A variety of factors, such as globalization, intense competition from within and outside the profession, and the "free agent market" for lawyers, have combined in recent years to change this scenario. Law firms increasingly are recognizing the need to develop strategic visions and to differentiate themselves in the marketplace. The "all things to all people" model is falling by the wayside as firms strive to increase profitability and achieve leadership positions in their target markets. These efforts are prompting firm leaders to seek ways to realign marketing resources and activities with the firm's strategic goals. The result will be an increased opportunity for marketing directors to have a real impact on their firms.

Marketing Activities

It is important to recognize that marketing is not an end in itself--that is there is nothing intrinsically good or useful about marketing. Marketing is a means of helping an organization to achieve its business goals. How much and what type of marketing a firm needs depends on what it wants to achieve.

There are a number of different categories of marketing activities.

Communications/promotional (seminars, public relations, newsletters, internal communications.)

Business development support (supporting individual lawyers, practice groups or offices through coaching, training, research assistance, database maintenance, proposal/presentation assistance.)

Service development (trend research, determining client needs, developing services or packages of services designed to profitably meet those needs.)

Service delivery (measuring client satisfaction, developing ways to improve client service and build stronger client relationships.)

Until about five years ago, the marketing programs of many firms, especially in New York, focused primarily on the first two categories of activities. The need for firms to differentiate themselves in the marketplace has pushed firms toward more sophisticated types of marketing.

Phases of Marketing

Law firm marketing activities can be categorized as falling into four evolutionary phases.

Phase I marketing programs are largely communications/promotional and reactive in their orientation. They include events planning, production and coordination of collateral materials and newsletters, directory listings, and support of individual attorney activities.

Phase II marketing programs build on Phase I activities by adding basic public relations, support of practice group activities, a Web site, and basic marketing training for partners. Phase II programs are still largely communications/promotions based and reactive to attorney needs and requests.

Phase III marketing programs begin to incorporate strategic elements and to focus on service development and delivery. They tend to be more proactive by identifying market and service opportunities for lawyers and practice groups to pursue and include efforts to differentiate the firm's services. Specific additional elements

present in Phase III programs include alignment with firm strategic direction; existence of practice groups and office plans; targeted trade association involvement; coordination of, and coaching for, beauty contests and proposals; utilization of a contact management database; sales and client service training; regular client surveys; and targeted public relations.

Phase IV is the most advanced level of marketing program in a law firm. It incorporates a particular focus on service development and delivery as well as on profitability, work management and pricing strategies. Programs at this level include significant research [and development efforts to identify trends and market opportunities](#), extensive client service training of lawyers and staff, key client relationship planning, a strong focus on individual and team selling, significant service differentiation efforts, strong internal communications program, and sophisticated market positioning and image advertising initiatives.

Market Position

Determining the type of marketing necessary to support a firm also requires an understanding of the markets in which the firm competes. (A market can be a geographic area, an industry or a population segment.) For example, in a market where the firm is an established player, what we call a mature market, a firm's marketing program should place less emphasis on communications and promotional strategies, designed to enhance the firm's visibility and credibility, and more emphasis on service development and delivery strategies designed to differentiate the firm's service and to build strong and profitable relationships with clients.

For example, market research showed that clients and prospects regarded the firm as one of the leading providers of both corporate and litigation services in the city where it was founded and had operated for decades. However, an analysis of the firm's financials indicated that its practice in that city was not highly profitable, despite the fact that the city's economy was booming. The firm's marketing resources were largely invested in promotional and credibility building activities, such as public relations, sponsorship of community events and advertising.

Because of this analysis the firm began to shift its resources to service development and delivery strategies, such as determining client needs and trends in the market and then identifying high-profit, high-value services to offer to target market niches. The firm also would pursue relationship enhancement/partnering initiatives with specific clients. A low to moderate investment in general promotional activities is all that is required to maintain the firm's high level of recognition in the market.

This same firm had launched some new practices in markets where it was a relatively new player. In these markets, the firm needed to invest considerably more resources in communications and promotional activities designed to prequalify and establish credibility for the firm in order to facilitate its business development efforts. Some resources also needed to address researching the needs in that marketplace in order to ensure that the firm identified appropriate opportunities.

The level, qualifications and size of marketing staff the firm requires is related to the firm's strategic goals, types of markets in which it competes, and the level of reactive support to be provided to individual attorneys. For established practice areas, firms require increased focus in the areas of service development and delivery. However, for its new offices, and particularly in relation to its expansion overseas, the firm requires a high degree of activity in the communications/promotions area.

In many firms, there is a mismatch between the application of the firm's strategic goals and market position, with significant communications/promotions staffing and other resources focused on established markets and a lesser degree of such support for the newer offices and practices where it would be most beneficial. Likewise, there often is insufficient staffing or other resources invested in service development and delivery-

related activities for the firm's established practices and offices that would help to increase their profitability.

An understanding of these issues can help firms to more closely align marketing resources with their strategic goals. The benefits of accomplishing this alignment include a greater and more visible return on the firm's marketing investment, an enhanced ability to hire and retain marketing staff, and an increased ability to manage and satisfy partner expectations.

Interested in Learning More About Legal Hiring? Read the Definitive Guide:

[How to Hire a Legal Recruiter for Your Law Firm: How Law Firms Recruit Attorneys Using Legal Recruiters](#)