Marketing Your Law Firm Through Practice Groups

Practice Groups are increasingly becoming the way law firms manage their businesses, including a significant component of the marketing agenda. The following ten ideas will help practice groups - and especially their leaders - decide the best ways to manage and focus their marketing activities.

1. Choose a focus.
With limited resources both dollars and hours it is important to focus where the group will get the best return on its investment. The traditional marketing mix includes promotion, business development, and client care.

Typically, however, there is a tendency to over-emphasize promotion in practice group marketing plans. Instead, switch your focus to a weighted emphasis on:
Business development, including market research, targeting prospects, selling to clients and prospects, researching and developing new products and services, knowledge management, and face-to-face opportunities.
Client care, including client interviews, surveys, client service programs and initiatives, Client Relationship Management, and other feedback mechanisms.
2. Target clients.
Instead of a "shotgun" approach, employ strategic thinking by targeting specific prospective clients, matters, and industries. Steps would include:
Identification of appropriate prospects via market research.
Development of dossiers on each target client or industry.
Development and implementation of plans of approach.
Analysis of results.
By their very nature, practice groups offer focus on client types, legal specialties, or industries. This allows the group to be very specific and strategic. It is much more manageable and effective to pick a particular group of targets, rather than trying to offer all things to all people.

3. Team up.
Practice groups are the perfect forum to foster the development and appropriate utilization of client teams. Client teams serve many useful purposes. They manage client loyalty; offer stability and variety in the relationship; are cost effective for clients; and are easier to leverage.

The collective knowledge of a team, when harnessed appropriately, will allow the group to identify and in some instances create opportunities in a timely manner, as well as offer a forum for quickly responding to these opportunities. They also provide a vehicle for offering enhanced service to clients.

4. No funding without follow-up.
Managing the marketing function means establishing rules and protocols that will enable the practice group leader and group members to make every dollar and every minute count. One way to improve the return on your marketing dollar investments is to require follow-up plans and/or activities for firm-funded initiatives. For example, if members of the group want to stage a seminar, be sure to have a plan in place that speaks to the follow-up that will occur when the presentation ends. Sample follow-up activities might include the following:
Create an extranet for attendees with all conference materials, presentations, speakers' bios, reading lists and discussion forums.
Have the relationship-managing attorney call the client to make sure the client received value from attending and has no lingering confusion about any of the topics discussed.
Developing a seminar advisory board of clients, other attendees, and co-sponsors or presenters to discuss future training needs the group might fulfill, possible follow-up ideas, and other planning issues.

Disseminating other materials to respond to questions asked or provide further depth.
Sending attendees thank you notes with news of upcoming events.
Contacting each person who attended to arrange for a follow-up meeting or lunch.
Conducting a post-event survey on the effectiveness of the seminar.
Having the discipline to conduct appropriate follow-up will have an impact on the bottom line of the group and the firm.

5. Compensate wisely.
Be sure to use compensation to reward marketing successes and encourage marketing efforts. It is also important that your system recognize team efforts and that team members are rewarded appropriately.
Business generation and client development should be measured on various factors, including:
Ability to generate new business from new clients. Often clients come to the firm based on collaborative efforts and, in such instances, all involved should be rewarded.
Ability to expand and develop existing clients. This is (and must be perceived) as important as generating new clients.
Cross-selling and institutionalizing clients.
Besides monetary compensation, offer other rewards via the practice group as well. Give recognition at meetings, share good news and successes through your intranet or newsletters; offer first chance at new opportunities to those who have proven they deserve it; stage contests and offer awards; and give additional perks for successes and/or efforts such as tickets to events.

6. Write it down.
Marketing activities are generally more successful when they are proactive, not reactive, it is important to develop marketing plans at the individual and practice group levels. Planning is important for many reasons, including:
Retention and recruitment: Getting and keeping clients is not an act of god.
Measuring results: If you don't commit to some sort of plan, chances are you won't see or know results.
Setting goals: Plans allow the creation of appropriate strategies.
Facilitates budgeting: Plans provide a reality check on costs.
Overcomes obstacles: Helps determine better use of non-billable time, often cited as the number one obstacle to effective marketing.
7. Share the knowledge.
Practice groups offer a manageable forum to collect, warehouse, assess, and use the information that will allow your firm to be an indispensable knowledge broker for your clients. Your effective marketing strategy should include fostering the development of knowledge management tools, systems, and processes.

There are two types of knowledge management systems: internally facing and externally facing, each of which play a role in marketing. From the internal perspective, knowledge management could include data useful to practice groups such as:
Skill inventories.
Qualification databases that describe completed work.
Shared contact and mailing lists.
Question and answer databases.
Externally, knowledge management has huge value in linking lawyers to clients and generating
Online advisory services.
Online training and compliance.
Work product retrieval systems.
8. Talk to clients.
We have moved from a client-focused business model to a client-driven business model. Successful practice groups will include client feedback as one of the top priorities in their marketing plans. In order to be distinctive from the competition and considered invaluable by your clients, you must continuously assess

their preferences and understand their businesses and industries.

Clients often cite pragmatic counseling as the number one value they seek from their lawyer or law firm. To be pragmatic to the extent necessary, you must talk to your clients. There are simple guidelines to follow for interviews between lawyers and their clients, including:

Learn more about your client and their strategic objectives, and how the delivery of legal services will assist in achieving these goals.

Clarify that this meeting is off the meter. Set that parameter up front.

Gather information about them and their company.

Discuss critical issues in their industry so you can get an increased sense of their concerns. Volunteer industry information of which they may not be aware. Do your homework.

Have the attitude that you are a pragmatic, trusted counselor and advisor, and not merely offering legal advice.

This is NOT a sales presentation. While it is important that the client understand you and your firm and how you can add value to their business, be aware that this type of meeting is more successful if it focuses on the client.

Listen carefully. Allow them to answer each question in as much depth as they desire. Be curious and ask questions continuously.

Do not promise anything you can't deliver. If faced with this, offer to check and get back to them, then do so as soon as possible.

Take copious and good notes throughout the meeting. Ask for specific comments on recent matters.

9. Do not forget the internal audience.

Marketing efforts by your practice groups should not be all externally facing. Be sure to remember your internal constituents as well, including other practice groups, firm management, staff, and any ancillary partners of the firm. Decide in your plans how you will keep these audiences informed of the group's expertise, successes, efforts, and initiatives. This is important for communication purposes and also to foster cross selling and cross training.

10. Be prolific.

As a management tool, practice groups offer the chance to organize marketing efforts and spread the work among a group, preventing a few people from becoming over burdened. Devote a portion of your practice group meetings to a discussion of marketing activities, and make assignments. Seek out and review opportunities for speaking, writing, meeting with prospects, developing new products and services, and gathering client feedback, then make specific assignments of responsibility and time lines.

Having to report progress to a practice group each month is a powerful motivator to get the job done and will lead to the completion of many more business development, client care, and visibility-building activities than would occur if left to chance.