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MARKETING

Marketing Basics for Lawyers: Tips, Tools and Techniques for Building Your Practice

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Introduction

Having worked with lawyers for nearly twenty years, I can tell you there is a common belief which resonates clearly in the hallways of most law firms: "I didn't go to law school to be a salesperson!" However, billing time and generating new business are the two primary activities separating the private practice of law from that of working for the government or working in a corporate legal department.

The Path to Partnership

Assuming the readers of this article are lawyers in private practice, the following tips have been written with the assumption that you will progress through the logical law firm path from new associate to senior associate, and then be considered for partnership after six to eight years.

That having been said, one thing must be stressed. As you proceed through your first two to three years after law school, your primary "mission" is to transfer the theory of law school into the actual practice of law. During this time, it is imperative to develop the skills as a lawyer that you will ultimately market to clients. However, during this practical learning phase, you can concurrently hone your skill in the art of providing exceptional service – to the partners or shareholders for whom you work.

What Does "Marketing" Mean When You're an Associate?

At this juncture in your career, marketing has a different meaning than it would for an established partner or shareholder.

It means…..learning to deliver exceptional service to your clients – the partners of the firm. Everything you will EVER need to know about client service you can put into action today.

It means….. beginning to lay the foundation for how you plan to attract clients to the firm and starting the process of building strong relationships.

It means…..doing great work with a focus on achieving personal and professional excellence.

It means…..practicing your client service skills with your internal clients.

The Importance of Building Relationships with Partners

One of the most important keys to your future success in marketing is to learn the art of building strong, enduring relationships. Following are some tips designed to help you practice your client service and relationship building skills with the partners in your firm:

- View the partners as your primary client at this juncture of your legal career.
- Be available to them and willing to pitch in when needed on a big project or case.
- Use the partners to "practice" your relationship building skills.

- Take a partner to lunch to find out more about his or her practice and to solicit any advice s/he has on helping you to build yours.
- Let them know what you have to offer clients and the firm; talk about a recent transaction or case that exemplifies your capabilities and interests.
- Let that partner know you would like to work with (or do more work with) him or her.
- Understand the partner's expectations upfront.
- Never miss a deadline (When is this due?).
- Return phone calls and email messages immediately.
- Discuss budget (how much time should this take?).
- Keep them informed on the status of the work you are doing for them (How would you like me to keep you up to date on this?).
- Ask for help and guidance as you need it.
- Show you're interested in working with them – that you appreciate their "business."
- Ask for feedback on your work. Don't wait for your annual performance review to do this. Let the partners know you want to build not only your substantive skills as a lawyer, but also your client service skills.
- Try never to say, "NO – I can't do this for you…. I'm too busy." You don't want to create a reputation of not being a team player.
- Focus on your client and do all you can to meet their goals and expectations of you.
- Establish a high degree of trust and confidence with partners by making your relationship with them a priority.
- Partners, associates – and clients – will only refer you into additional opportunities if they trust you, respect you and have complete confidence in your abilities.
- During this time it is critical to have an unwavering focus on detail. Only submit a project to a partner if it is truly your best work.
- If you let a partner down it is highly unlikely you'll be given a second chance, particularly if something you've done requires an explanation or apology to a client.

In Closing – on Partners as Clients

Everything you do in this area will benefit you when you begin to directly serve clients of the firm. In fact, if you practice the concepts presented above on the partners with whom you work, you will be well on your way to putting skills in place that will benefit you your entire career.

Creating a Foundation: Manage Your Contacts!

There are some additional activities you can pursue as an associate to create the foundation upon which you will ultimately launch your own marketing plan:

- Don't lose track of your law school and college friends. Make a point of staying in touch with people you connected with (liked, trusted and respected). They will be the legal services decision makers of tomorrow. Meet them for lunch a couple of times per year – make it a priority to stay in touch. Practice developing client relationships by developing the contacts and network you currently have.
- Develop and continue to build this A-level group of contacts – now and throughout your legal career. These contacts are the key to your future success in marketing – they will become clients or referral sources for you and for the firm.
- Think about not just people who could become clients, but also those who could develop into referral sources for you.

- Ensure those on your list receive a holiday card and are added to the firm's database to receive what you feel they would be most interested in (newsletters, seminar invitations, etc.).

Build your Expertise, and Market your Firm!

You can't market individually until you really have something to market. Master the practice of law – learn from the partners with whom you work. During this stage, however, when you personally don't have the experience, you can market the depth of experience of the firm and its partners. Practice your marketing skills by marketing the firm. A few additional tips include:

- Acknowledge strategies that will ultimately work best for you in marketing may not work for the person sitting next to you. You need to determine what marketing activities (writing, speaking, networking, etc.) you really enjoy and build your practice around those areas.
- Become involved in at least one trade association in addition to the national, state and county bar associations – that attracts clients in an industry of interest to you. Go to the events – meet people – volunteer to serve on a committee. Make a commitment to becoming a high profile member of at least one non-legal trade association.
- Learn from the Masters! Solicit advice from the partners in your firm who have successfully figured out how to attract new business – learn from the rainmakers.
- Participate in opportunities you might have with partners to attend a “real” marketing luncheon with a client or referral source (Partners: invite associates to these events with you!).
- Offer to work with a partner to draft an article for publication.

It is our hope by providing the proper perspective on how associates can build the foundation upon which their future marketing efforts will be based, marketing and client service will become as important to you as the substantive areas of law you practice. Remember that by focusing on honing your client service and relationship building skills, you are best positioning yourself for your future success in marketing.

Terrie Wheeler is president of **Professional Services Marketing, Inc**., a firm serving the legal industry for the past ten years with creative and cost-effective marketing strategies. In addition, PSM offers ***Your Personal Marketing Coach*** program designed to help lawyers individually build rewarding and lucrative practices. Ms. Wheeler has a Master of Arts degree in business and marketing, and prior to founding her company worked for three large Twin Cities' law firms as a Marketing Director. She conducts **marketing and client service training** for firms in Minnesota and nationally.