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The five biggest marketing mistakes law firms make

By Nora Lockwood Toohar
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Each year, law firms start out with the best of marketing intentions. But too often, they're tripped up by common mistakes. Whether it's wasting money on the wrong marketing events or hamstringing their in-house marketing professionals, the best and brightest of the legal profession often fail to make the grade when it comes to marketing. These mistakes cost law firms of all sizes the opportunity to win new clients and generate additional business from existing clients. Several legal marketing experts have offered their suggestions about the five biggest marketing mistakes law firms make and how to fix them. Here's what they said:

Jim Calloway: Director of the Oklahoma Bar Association's Management Assistance Program and author of "Jim Calloway's Law Practice Tips Blog" (http://jimcalloway.typepad.com/lawpracticetips/oklahoma_bar_association)

1. Not having a Web presence.

Small firms, especially ones that practice in a specific geographic area, may be missing the opportunity to attract out-of-state clients who need a firm to handle a legal matter in their area. Also, Generation X'ers may not even consider a law firm that doesn't have a web page.

2. Failing to market until there is a slowdown in business.

"You need to market constantly," Calloway said. "If you just wait until business is slow, not only do you not have money available to market your program, but it's not going to produce immediate results."

3. Not having a marketing budget.

It's a common mistake with small firms. They'll blow their marketing money on a single event, then miss out on important opportunities the rest of the year.

"By having a budget, you'll know how much you spend a year on marketing, and you can make an informed decision when various opportunities come up," Calloway said.

4. Not having a written marketing plan with specific goals.

"Lawyers tend to live very busy lives," Calloway noted. If an attorney plans to take three referrals out to lunch, for example, it needs to be written on the calendar with a specific deadline. "If you don't put it in writing, it's not going to happen," he said.

5. Failing to recognize that marketing is about relationships.

"It's too easy, especially in certain types of practices like personal injury, to focus on advertising," Calloway said. The goal of all marketing should be to gain the trust of people who can help obtain new business for you, such as a general counsel in a company you already work with.

"We can play with the Internet and do fancy brochures, but the important thing to understand about marketing is having clients who know they can trust you and give the word of mouth to other people," he said.

Tom Kane: Legal marketing consultant in Sarasota, Fla., and author of "The Legal Marketing Blog." (www.legalmarketingblog.com)

1. Failing to visit clients.

"Go visit your clients – off the clock, at their place of business," Kane advised. Attorneys should visit clients to see new buildings and factories, or just to touch base. Although they shouldn't visit with the intention of trolling for new business, odds are they'll walk out with some.

"The rainmakers say it works every time. If a client has a problem on the desk he has been procrastinating about, you're going to come out with a file," Kane said.

2. Failing to be responsive to existing clients.

"The best source of new business is existing clients – whether it's new work from an existing client or a word-of-mouth referral," Kane said. Everything a law firm does is marketing – from how a receptionist answers the phone to how quickly a lawyer returns a phone call. Even office decor and location should be geared toward client convenience and comfort.

"All of that equates to the feeling clients have toward the lawyer and whether they'll give him any more business," he said.

3. Failing to seek client feedback.

Whether it's part of an ongoing relationship, or just an annual check-in, attorneys should remember to ask: How are we doing and what can we do better?

4. Failing to learn the client's business.

"What you want to be is a deal-maker, not a deal-breaker," Kane said. By visiting clients and getting to know their business, attorneys can become an ally. And that means clients will continually produce new business for the attorney.

5. Surprising your client – on anything.

No one likes surprises, but when a lawyer surprises his client, from a marketing standpoint they are committing suicide.

Larry Bodine: Legal marketing consultant in Chicago and author of "Larry Bodine's Professional Marketing Blog,"

(http://pm.typepad.com/professional_marketing_bl)

1. Not having a marketing strategy.

According to Bodine, many firms wait until their rainmakers are about to retire before they suddenly realize no one else in the firm has ever opened a file.

It's crucial, he said, to have a written plan that addresses overall marketing goals and has specific objectives. It's equally critical to review the plan regularly – say every six months – to see what has actually been accomplished.

Bodine advises firms to identify their most profitable practices and focus their marketing efforts on those areas. Marketing can start with simple things like visiting clients at their offices, taking them out to lunch and other relationship-building activities.

2. Focusing on yourself instead of your clients.

Instead of describing the firm's practices on a website and in printed materials, present the firm in light of how it can serve the industry or client it hopes to represent.

3. Failing to mention representative clients.

"Spelling out your client roster is a great way to distinguish yourself and flag appropriate clients. Don't be shy about asking your best clients to show the flag – they may well be honored to be asked, and delighted to be listed," he said.

4. Failing to list success stories.

Most marketing materials consist of vague brochures touting the firm's "excellence." Instead, Bodine suggests that these materials describe each lawyer's accomplishments and the firm's major cases.

5. Repeating mistakes.

Some firms make the same marketing mistakes year after year – like buying tables that go empty at a local charity event, mailing thousands of holiday cards nobody reads or sponsoring expensive events that attract freeloaders, but no new clients. Bodine advises firms to tally marketing expenditures and track which items actually produced results. If no result has been achieved, the activity should be scrapped.

Gerry Riskin: Consultant with Edge International and author of "Amazing Firms, Amazing Practices." (www.gerryriskin.com)

1. Focusing internally, instead of on the client.

"Many law firms see the world from their own perspective rather than from the client's perspective," Riskin said. Smart firms have organized into "client teams" comprised of attorneys from a variety of practice areas. For example, a retail client team could include litigators, IP specialists and corporate and employment attorneys.

Each client team spends some non-billable time with its assigned client, so the attorneys have a "profound understanding" of the client's needs.

"In big firms today, the client relationships are getting much too big and routinized, so we have to fight to get to that proximity to the client," Riskin said. Some firms even have a "client panel" at their retreats, in which clients openly discuss what they like and don't like about the law firm.

2. Relying on "low-touch" marketing.

"Law firms seem to be looking for ways to market to clients that really don't involve personal contact. They want a brochure, an ad campaign and to support the symphony. They want to somehow magically build this amazing profile so that clients just come running to the door," Riskin said. "The good firms are high-touch."

Contacting a few prospective clients and meeting with them can have a much bigger pay-off than a mass mailing to the entire industry.

3. Failing to utilize marketing professionals.

Good marketing professionals are extremely valuable to a law firm. Too often, however, law firms discourage their marketing pros from trying new tactics.

"The marketing professional will want to experiment, but the lawyer will say, 'Who else has done it, and has it definitely worked for them?'" said Riskin.

4. Over-lawyering.

"As lawyers, we're trained to be critical and analytical. We're trained to look for what's wrong with the picture," Riskin said. Law firms sometimes need to take a risk with their marketing. For example, Clifford Chance, a global law firm based in London, recently took out a liquor license so it could serve liquor to its clients after hours.

"They could have been ridiculed for that, but they just darn well did it," Riskin said.

5. A lack of accountability.

A lot of firms plan to hit a home run when it comes to marketing, but six months later they haven't accomplished any of their goals. Riskin suggests having regular check-ins to see how attorneys are doing with their individual marketing goals. Some firms even have weekly status reports, checked by either a marketing professional or practice group leader to keep everyone on track.

"The greatest power is our mutual embarrassment factor," Riskin noted.

BOXED:

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Calloway

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Kane

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