

10 Steps to Building & Sustaining a **Marketing Culture** at Your Firm



By Larry Bodine

Getting lawyers and law firms do things differently is not an easy task and instilling a marketing mindset among lawyers is a major effort for most firms, resembling the proverbial challenge of “herding cats.”

A national consulting firm recently examined personalities of lawyers from around the country using the Caliper personality index and was able to quantify what many of us have known for years. **Compared to the rest of us, lawyers:**

- **Hate change**, respecting precedent because it was drilled into them at law school;
- **Are highly skeptical of new ideas and concepts**, demanding proof that change will work;
- **Love autonomy**, preferring their own judgment over that of any hierarchy or policy; and
- **Have a high sense of urgency**, expecting immediate results on even complex efforts.

It's not surprising, then, that most law firms (especially smaller and mid-size firms) operate much like fraternities. Governance and decision-making are often difficult and time-consuming, because everyone wants a voice in the process. However, the most profitable firms are moving closer to a corporate model of governance, with institutional goals, strong leadership and streamlined governance. They are also starting to embrace marketing, recognizing the need to get closer to existing clients and invest time and resources on focused, proactive strategies to go after new ones.

So why try to roll the marketing boulder uphill? Simply because any firm that wants to survive in today's increasingly competitive marketplace must support a marketing and sales culture. Mergers, acquisitions and consolidations, rising associate salaries and operating costs, and client cost-cutting are making lawyers run their firms more like a business, and less like a profession. Failure to market brings red ink, irrelevance and an “out of business” sign on your door. Marketing is what enables a firm to attract and retain desirable clients, and it puts the firm in a position to fire the ones it no longer wants.

That said, a marketing culture can't be implemented overnight – it must be slowly, gradually fostered through basic, focused, step-by-step efforts. Overcome typical lawyer impatience and resistance by showcasing successful pilot programs. A communications effort that presents the proof, demonstrates a successful result and validates the judgment of the participants, will appeal to lawyers' lemming instinct: “If Jim can do it, so the hell can I!”

The key, then, is to create the initial success that will make everyone in the firm believe marketing matters. I mean really matters. As marketing consultant to thousands of lawyers at hundreds of firms, I've seen that ten key elements are absolutely crucial to generate marketing momentum. Neglect even one of them and your legacy will be, “We tried that before, it didn't work.”

1. Find a Passionate Leader. If a firm's leaders – those lawyers who have the most clout and the greatest respect – aren't committed to marketing, no one will be. Convince them that marketing is an investment in tomorrow, not just an expense for today. Cultivate a senior level marketing czar who is passionate about marketing and inspires others. Don't waste your time on naysayers or junior associates. Convince an alpha male, and the herd will follow.

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2. Apply Some Structure. Attorneys are the world’s worst visualizers. Vague generalizations about how marketing works won’t motivate them. Your marketing effort has to involve concrete, tangible benchmarks and requirements that show the firm is serious:

- **Set clear expectations for non-billable time devoted to marketing.** Set a target of 200 hours a year for partners and 100 hours per year for associates. Overcoming the billable hour fixation is crucial for marketing efforts, which often take years to generate results.
- **Incorporate marketing into partnership requirements.** Derail the partnership track of grinders who sit at their computers all day and don’t have a book of business.
- **Create marketing plans at every level – attorney, industry or practice group, the entire firm.** The marketing plans should be written, simple and focused, and should set short-term goals (have lunch with two media industry prospects per month) in the pursuit of long-term objectives (double billings with media clients).
- **Communicate marketing successes by every tool at your command.** Meetings, emails, newsletters, bulletin boards in the lounge, Intranet postings, monthly status reports, and more.
- **Monitor marketing performance.** Hold the laggards accountable and reward the performers. Most marketing initiatives must be repeated ten or more times over a period of two-plus years before they pay off. Rewarding only the ultimate result isn’t enough incentive. Peg some compensation to efforts that emphasize and support the marketing plan.
- **Eliminate the time and expense wasters.** Scrap “random acts of golf and lunch” and “powerful partner pet projects” that don’t support firm-wide marketing objectives.

3. Provide Training and Resources. Sales techniques aren’t taught in law school. There are, however, plenty of sales training programs for lawyers that emphasize the basics: if you’ve taken a prospect to lunch seven times, ask if you can handle their contract work. One-on-one coaching sessions can be supplemented by attendance at the Marketing Partner Forum and the Legal Marketing Association annual meeting, participation in the Law Marketing listserv, and circulation of marketing newsletters. Help lawyers overcome their marketing insecurities by exposing them to best practices.

4. Create a Forum of Accountability. The best way to generate marketing momentum is through face-to-face discussions – but not with marketing at the tail end of a long agenda. Create specific marketing forums where groups of 10 to 20 attorneys can report on their initiatives, share leads and ideas, and be held publicly accountable for their marketing efforts. Meetings should be held at least monthly, scheduled well in advance for a set time and place, with mandatory attendance and a leader committed to marketing in charge. Distribute minutes and make sure the results are publicized through reports, newsletters and retreat presentations. The only way to overcome resistance to these forums is to make clear that they are about results and accountability – and then use them to reinforce both.

5. Invest Time and Money. Every firm’s needs are different, but certain rules of thumb apply – for example, one in-house marketer for approximately every 40 lawyers, and a marketing budget roughly equal to 3% of gross revenues. Lawyers in their skepticism will ask, “Is this really necessary?” Appeal to the lemming instinct by demonstrating which other firms are doing at least as much.

6. Identify Your A, B and C Clients. Law firms often fail to identify the clients and the business they want, making little differentiation in attorney time and effort between getting the \$5,000 real estate contract and the \$5 million IPO. You should identify your A-List clients, the frequent flyers you really want to encourage, and emphasize winning more business from these guys. Then target them: Go visit them at their place of business, solicit their feedback on your services and act on it, invite them to events and seminars, join their trade associations, wine and dine them. Showing that you really do care about them is the essential step to getting more work from them.

7. Focus on Industries, Not Area of Law. Too many law firms practice marketing by trying to market their practice. Clients don’t think that way. They focus on their business and industry concerns, and want their law firm to do the same. Competent legal technicians are a dime a dozen; law firms that talk the language of the hospitality industry are valued much more highly. Focusing on industries targeted by your marketing plan prevents wasting time and effort by trying to be all things to all people. It also promotes cross-selling among practices, as you identify which real estate, corporate, tax and other services you can tailor to clients in specific industries.

8. Get an Identity. Emphasize that you’re not just another law firm. Making an impression captures share of mind, then share of market. All the effective marketer’s tools apply here: a logo, a short and memorable firm name (no more than two words), sharp web site, readable collateral materials that are not mind-numbing exercises in lawyer-ese, email templates with links back to your web site, promotional items that clients will want to use. Remember that a nice brochure or impressive web site constitute just a small part of a total marketing effort.

9. Hire “People People.” Lawyers are trained to be good communicators before groups, whether juries or boards of directors. They typically aren’t good at establishing interpersonal, one-on-one communication. Rather than trying to turn an introverted lawyer into a rainmaker, it makes sense to hire lawyers with a focus on personality as well as on grades and law journal experience. Look for outgoing types who are flexible and embrace change, and they can become missionaries for your marketing efforts. The same applies to everyone in the organization – receptionists, administrative assistants and (yes) marketers.

10. Manage Lawyer Expectations. All the steps that we’ve discussed here take time, and the marketing plan they support will continue to evolve. Make sure the lawyers at your firm know and understand this from the start. Set a limited number of priorities and don’t try to move too far too fast. But make absolutely certain that you deliver everything that you promise – which, in the end, is a good definition of effective marketing. ■