

LEGAL MARKETING BRIEFS: PHILADELPHIA CHAPTER



You've Come a Long Way, Baby: The Evolution and Maturation of Legal Marketing

By Kimberly Alford Rice

When I began my career in legal marketing in 1991, the legal marketing landscape looked and acted very differently than it does today. Like many of us “old timers”, it is fascinating to have witnessed the developments and the maturation our legal marketing profession has undergone and continues to experience. Let me explain.

Marketing vs. Client Development

Within the last 20 years, the mindset of law firms has shifted from being very skittish about proactively promoting their services and the reputations of their law firm to clients and key audiences to what we see today with print and online advertising campaigns in mainstream publications like Fortune and Forbes with surprising “in your face” messages (“Simply More

Worldly” and “Lead the Pack”).

In my first law firm, one of the senior partners literally frowned when the Client Development members would even utter the word “marketing”. His reaction was always the same “We really don’t use that word around here.” Today, this fella would be laughed out of his office.

Lesson Learned: Law firms have finally accepted (and many have actually embraced the fact) that if they don’t assertively strengthen relationships with their clients, other firms are more than delighted to move in and do so. This acknowledgement has been huge in our space. It has brought some of the “grinders” and “minders” out of their offices to interface regularly with clients, join them at trade conferences, and make it a priority to stay in front of them.

Life Before The Internet...Technology Has Changed EVERYTHING

It is almost inconceivable to imagine life before the Internet, when legal marketers were forced to actually subscribe to and plow through the onerous Encyclopedia of Associations volumes to research appropriate professional associations in which firm attorneys should be involved. That is but one simple example of how technology has literally changed the face of legal marketing.

Instead of sending e-blasts, e-newsletters and e-holiday cards to various constituents as firms prolifically do today, the standard operating procedure fifteen years ago was to create a very basic (read: non-creative) collateral piece which was usually designed in-house by someone who

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had never used desktop publishing software (let alone professional design software), send it to an outside printer, then mail house to be mailed in bulk. This process could easily take weeks, instead of a day or less. Yes, times have changed.

Moreover, there was very little business intelligence research happening as a result of so little available information on prospect companies or even

competing firms. Sure, we had Martindale-Hubbell, Hoover's and Dun and Bradstreet reports, but nowhere near the amount of information and data that can be found online today to research privately- and publicly-held companies to target or even to gather pertinent information when responding to RFPs.

Lesson Learned: The advancement of marketing technology has revolutionized how legal marketers strategize and deliver services to their law firms. It has never been easier and more economical to reach out to a broader base of targeted audiences with highly professionally-developed messages and more compelling calls to action. With the introduction of Web 2.0, every law firm attorney can literally have a continuous interaction with their entire network with a simple click of a mouse (or touch pad).

Generalist vs. Specialist

As the legal marketing profession has matured, we have seen a stark shift in how marketing departments are

staffed. For most of my in-house legal marketer career, I either directed or was a member of a very small marketing department in which we handled the full range of legal marketing services: identifying new business opportunities; branding campaigns and developing associated collateral materials; website development

and online marketing initiatives; public and media relations; event planning, marketing

training, and the list goes on and on.

Not only was it an unsustainable model in which the firm and clients were not best served, but it was short-sighted to think that so few qualified professionals could effectively develop, support, and assist firms and all its lawyers (sometimes hundreds) in strategic initiatives to bring about any measurable change and achievement in all things marketing. And, because firms were still grappling with the ideal role of marketing within their firms, there was little political will to make many changes.

Today, it is so refreshing to see firms hail discipline experts in specialist roles (like proposal analysts and web content writers) whereby they are provided the opportunity to leverage their expertise fully to bring about positive change to help their firm's achieve their strategic marketing goals.

Lesson Learned: Through the tireless effort of so many legal marketing trailblazers (such as Jim

Durham, Larry Bodine, and Sally Schmidt) marketing and business development are finally being recognized in law firms much like they are in mainstream corporate America: as a necessary part of the business model without which the business (law firm) cannot sustain itself.

The Bottom Line

It has been exciting and yes, at times, frustrating to have worked for so many years in legal marketing through all the growing pains but it is now a very rewarding time to be a part of an industry which continues to evolve, grow, and ride the wave of change. Hang on to see what's coming in the next 20 years.

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