

It's The Way We've Always Done It

Reluctance To Change In Professional Services Marketing

How strange that, for a group that so vehemently espouses change – the professional services marketers – we ourselves are so reluctant to change.

We are the imaginers, the thoughtful ones, the thought leaders, the innovators, the idea people (just ask us – we'll tell you). We are the ones the accountants and lawyers depend upon for help in competing in a highly competitive world. For distinguishing our client firms from others, for using ideas to attract new business to them. And yet, nothing much has changed in what we do since 1977, when *Bates* first made it legal to compete with frank marketing – to use the promotional tools of marketing to attract new business.

Is it that we don't know how, or that we're afraid to take chances, or to explore unfamiliar territory? Or is it because if we are too innovative, we'd have a hard time getting it approved by lawyers or accountants who lag behind us in understanding marketing?

How we market now has improved a bit since *Bates*, but primarily in refining and embellishing basic practices, which is not quite innovative..

In 1980, when I was one of the first post-*Bates* marketers, working for a then-Big Eight accounting firm, I was asked by the Virginia Accounting Society to write an article on accounting firm marketing for their journal. In writing my new book, *Professional Services Marketing 3.0*, I resurrected that article and included it. That article is as current today as it was the day I wrote it – except for three things...

- The ranks of professional services marketers have increased to several thousand, from just the very few of us who had been doing it at the time I wrote the article.
- The internet and social media – but they are simply communications tools, which are now diminishing -- and in some cases, replacing -- the printed media.
- The emergence of what I call *Professional Services Marketing 3.0*, which is comprised of a new acceptance by professionals of the significance of marketing, the erosion of barriers between marketers and professionals that

long inhibited innovation in marketing performance, and the increased participation of the professionals in the marketing process itself. (1.0 is the Bates decision. 2.0 is the interim period since then – the one that we are still in)

The ability to compete openly, by the way, is a major factor in the innovation of the professional firm. This innovation has been accelerated by the exploding changes in technology.

Oh, one more thing. The emergence of a whole new body of jargon, designed more to impress the non-marketers than to contribute to the marketing process itself. Stuff like *branding*, which is really name recognition and reputation, and *thought leadership*, which usually winds up meaning knowing what everybody else has been doing and how to do it. Of all that I've seen that's called thought leadership, maybe 10% or less that's genuinely original. It too often means something clichéd. (I've long defined a cliché as a statement that goes trippingly off the tongue, without bothering to visit the brain on the way out.)

In the early days, the excuse was that marketing was so new to the professions that the lawyers and accountants, willing to participate in this new marketing, didn't have sufficient understanding of the marketing process to judge the qualifications of job applicants. (To a much smaller extent, that problem still exists, based on some of the marketers I've spoken to recently). Today, the social media is ripe with marketers – both staff and consultants – who so lack experience that their knowledge of the strategies and mechanics are actually primitive or even non-existent. And where there is no knowledge or participation on the part of the lawyers or the accountants, the blind are leading the blind. That is part of the reason for the jargon to replace meaning. And that, by the way, is one of the reasons for the stagnation. And, perhaps, as well, for the high percentage of turnover of law and accountant firm marketers.

Looking at agenda for recent accounting and legal marketing conventions reveals lots of new titles for presentations, but the content is virtually the same as it was in the early 1980s.

Amazing. Especially in view of the fact that the legal and accounting professions are among the few that depend upon the participation of the lawyers and accountants. The people in the factories that make products are rarely participants in the marketing strategies. But trying running an accounting or a law marketing strategy without a lawyer or an accountant's active (if sometimes reluctant) participation. It can't be done.

I don't mean to carp, or to specifically fault either the marketers or the professionals. The right to market openly is only 35 or so years old. Really, a short time in a process that brings two disparate groups together in an evolutionary process. Many new people enter the marketing field each year, with no formal training in the process. Nor do the business schools -- most of them -- understand the difference between product marketing and professional services marketing, which almost invariably results in short

tenure and marketing failure, as well as diminished faith by professionals in the process itself.

At the same time, we live in a highly dynamic time. So much has changed in the economy, in internationalization and technology, in emerging and decline industries, and in the competitive environment in professional services -- and still, nothing much has changed since that 1980 article I wrote in *The Virginia Accountant*.

What makes all this so frustrating is that there is so much that can be done to ameliorate the situation.

There are so many books and articles and internet instructions on the basics of professional services marketing that it should be virtually impossible not to know how marketing works. This goes for the lawyers and accountants, as well as the marketers

The law and accounting schools are anachronistic, most of them, in teaching law and accounting students the basics of practice development.

The law and accounting firms must recognize the realities of marketing, and both the professionals and the marketers must better understand not just the process, but the expectations. I know of many excellent marketing programs that failed because of a lack of that understanding.

The barriers against mutual understanding by both marketers and professionals, just now beginning to erode, must be deliberately torn down, and both sides must make a greater effort to understand the other's mechanics and process.

Both sides must better understand that they are functioning in not just a client acquiring mode, but in a competitive mode. This is the fertile ground for innovation.

Both sides -- and particularly the marketers -- must take pains to understand not just client companies, but the industries in which their clients function. This is where the dynamic of the economy is most significant. This is where the trends of change show first. Competitive intelligence -- understanding what your competition is doing -- not to imitate, but to improve -- is crucial. This is the secret of successful marketing. And this is where genuine thought leadership begins.

And marketers must learn to ask themselves, "This is the way I did it yesterday. Is there a better way to do it today?" That always works.

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