

Setting the stage for lawyers: Trends in strategic marketing for law firms

Janet Ellen Raasch

Janet Ellen Raasch is a writer and ghostwriter who works closely with lawyers, law firms and other professional services providers – to help them achieve name recognition and new business through publication of articles and books for print and keyword-rich content for the Internet. She can be reached at (303) 399-5041 or jeraasch@msn.com.

Imagine that you have arrived at a theater where the stage is set but the actors have not yet made their appearance. You can anticipate a lot about the play just by looking at the set. It is bright and cheerful? Dark and gloomy? Modern, traditional or old-fashioned? Before the actors have even opened their mouths, you have formed a pretty strong impression of what's to come.

“I like to use this metaphor to explain the role of institutional marketing at a law firm,” said Norm Rubenstein. “The lawyers are the actors – the individuals who ‘make the sale’ of legal services. The marketers are the set designers and directors – the individuals who set the stage and orchestrate the process in order to facilitate the ‘sale’ of legal services.

“If a law firm’s marketers are doing their jobs right,” said Rubenstein, “potential clients have formed a pretty strong positive impression of a firm, practice group or lawyer before they even start to ‘talk business.’ If they are not doing their jobs, potential clients will have no impression at all – or will be swayed by the impressions of others.”

Rubenstein is a partner in Zeughauser Group (www.zeughausergroup.com). He is a former national president of the Legal Marketing Association and has served as CMO of three global law firms and as a consultant to many others. Co-presenting at this event was Melissa Hoff, also a partner with Zeughauser.

Rubenstein and Hoff discussed strategic marketing trends for lawyers and law firms at the monthly educational program of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the LMA (www.rockymountainlma.com), held in Denver June 10 at Maggiano’s Little Italy.

“Over the past 20 years, there has been a great shift in the roles and responsibilities of legal marketers – mostly due to an increasingly competitive and global marketplace,” said Rubenstein.

“In its early days, legal marketing was purely promotional. Practitioners engaged in a wide range of random activities to promote the firm, its practice areas and its individual lawyers,” said Rubenstein. “Marketers were not expected to examine the big picture. Those with the inclination to do so rarely had the time.

“Today, at the best firms, legal marketing has become strategic,” said Rubenstein. “Senior practitioners make a scientific study of the market -- and use this information to generate a marketing plan supported by the appropriate legal products, pricing, placement and promotions. The best legal marketing programs demonstrate the value of ‘market pull’ over ‘product push.’”

According to Zeughauser Group research, there are at least ten “best practices” that differentiate successful and strategic law firms from their less successful counterparts.

“These best practices do not constitute a ‘menu’ from which law firms can pick and choose a few items,” said Hoff. “Rather, they are a prescription. The healthiest law firms incorporate at least some elements from each of the ten best practices.”

1. **A strong, differentiated identity.** The successful law firm has achieved affirmative, unaided, top-of-mind name recognition in its targeted service niches. “A strong, differentiated identify correlates with short-listing, which correlates to increased business opportunity and, potentially, increased revenue,” said Rubenstein. “The successful law firm markets with a purpose – it has a carefully crafted brand.”
2. **Competitive intelligence.** The successful law firm uses the Internet to gather and analyze competitive intelligence – on an ongoing as well as a situational (in preparation for an interview, for example) basis. “CMOs tell us that the next position they are planning to add is a market researcher or an analyst,” said Hoff.
3. **Client service and retention.** The successful law firm creates multi-disciplinary client teams and engages in formal client satisfaction and loyalty programs. “When done effectively and acted upon, client satisfaction interviews build loyalty and yield extremely useful information,” said Rubenstein. “We predict a significant uptick in formal CSI programs over the next few years.”
4. **Face-to-face business development.** The successful law firm understands the importance of relationships in “sales” – and the fact that the best relationships are created and nourished in person. “Good individual coaching can help your lawyers develop their face-to-face business development skills,” said Hoff.
5. **Constant communications.** The successful law firm communicates constantly. External communications focus on creating awareness in the marketplace. “Members of your external target market should be contacted in some way – other than via documents or bills -- at least 12-20 times each year,” said Rubenstein. “These contacts should be personalized whenever possible.” Internal communications focus on sharing information about the market and the firm’s activities in the market.
6. **Technology.** The successful law firm uses technology like CRM systems to archive and share information. “Software that can search all of a firm’s existing systems -- mining them to unearth otherwise hidden relationships – may end up as a well-received alternative to CRMs,” said Hoff.

7. **Measure success.** The successful law firm finds a way to communicate the value of marketing internally and to test the efficacy of its strategies. “Law firms cannot calculate traditional return-on-investment for marketing programs in the same way that corporations do,” said Rubenstein. “Instead, create, monitor and internally publicize proxy measures like readership studies or Web site page hits to assess impact.”

8. **Skill-building.** The successful law firm provides ongoing business-development training for lawyers as well as marketers and other law firm business professionals.

9. **Program integration.** The successful law firm understands and integrates all three areas of marketing practice in a continuous strategic loop: branding and communications, business development and sales, and client service and retention. “All three are essential to a successful strategic marketing plan,” said Hoff.

10. **Marketing culture.** The successful law firm embraces a marketing culture all the way from the top down – making lawyers accountable for their activities and rewarding performance.

“The day when an entire law firm could be ‘fed’ by the activities of a few rainmakers is long gone,” said Rubenstein. “Today, every lawyer must be expected to make a contribution to the development of new business – using the tactics that best fit his or her own personality and the culture of the firm.

“For one lawyer, this might be public speaking or involvement in a trade group,” said Rubenstein. “For another, it might be publishing or teaching. For another, it might be personal relationships. For another, it might be creating and maintaining a blog or a wiki -- or perhaps carefully mining a social network. For each lawyer, at least one tactic will be a comfortable fit.”