

How to Select a Marketing Firm: Some Tips From the “Other Side”

By Les Altenberg, President, A.L.T. Legal Professionals Marketing Group

The decision to work with a marketing firm or consultant is not an easy one. Lawyers are not marketers by nature and they don't teach practice building in most law schools. Hiring a marketing vendor requires an investment and that doesn't even include the expenses involved in the actual purchasing of ad space, pay-per-click services, broadcast time, printing services, etc. It also does not include the significant investment of time that will be required as well.

But once the decision to move forward has been made, how do and how should law firms go about the actual selection process?

Part of the answer lies in determining what it is that the practice hopes the marketing vendor will help the firm accomplish. Generic goals such as *greater exposure, more clients, more revenue*, etc. are not nearly as helpful as tight, specific objectives. For example, *seeking a 10% increase in new client revenue over a 1-year period, raising the profile of the family law department among the rest of the legal community, or raising the image of the firm so as to justify higher rates*. These are more action-oriented directives. One might even call them strategies vs. objectives. And if a firm cannot, on its own, reach a consensus as to these types of guiding directives, then it is probably best served by seeking an experienced marketing vendor or professional who can look at the practice from a holistic perspective.

An objectives-driven approach is infinitely better than one that simply suggests that the firm needs a new ad campaign, or a revitalized web site, or better signage for a trade show booth. This is because it is often a blending of several marketing tools that gets a firm to where it needs to be. A new ad campaign suggests perhaps a new image altogether, which in turn may affect not just the campaign itself, but the web site as well. A revitalized site is enhanced with a more concerted search engine optimization (SEO) program. And that new signage may be deemed necessary to attract more visitors to a trade booth, though an ad in the show guide, or a press release promoting a giveaway may do likewise.

The point is things work together in different ways and it is incumbent upon the law firm to select a vendor well-versed in the art of developing the best marketing mix...and doing so within dollar and time constraints. For example, too often we have seen a law practice suddenly cut its advertising efforts or its PR campaign in favor of some service offering quick results via SEO or pay-per-click. The truth of the matter is that each of these types of marketing tools serve different purposes and have different strengths and weaknesses. The SEO vendor, the newspaper, the direct mail house, etc., are all there to provide specific services – regardless of the unique challenges of the firm. They may well be part of the solution to a specific challenge, but each is offering that service to the firm *regardless* of the firm's unique needs.

Net net, in choosing marketing vendors, it is better to select those that either a) offer a truly holistic approach or b) clearly address how their services can be a vital part of the firm's *overall* marketing initiative.

Once the firm has decided upon the type of vendor it is seeking to hire, the next step is determining the criteria on which it will base its decision. Marketing vendors come in many shapes and sizes. As stated, some offer very specific services. Others are more broad-based. But the same holds true in other areas as well. Some may focus exclusively on the legal industry, others, any industry. Some will be situated close by the firm, while others may be in remote locations. Some may be large, others small. Knowing what it is that the firm considers important looking will make the entire process go more smoothly.

Next, it's critical that the firm outline very clearly to its potential vendors those pre-determined objectives and qualities which it is seeking. This is vital as it serves to move the process along more efficiently.

Then the ball moves towards the potential vendors. The firm's decision makers must ask themselves whether the firm needs all of the bells and whistles the vendor is offering. How do the vendor's services align with the stated requirements? How well did the vendor "listen" to the firm's statement as to its needs. Is the solution offered and/or the marketing tools being suggested make sense in terms of achieving stated objectives? Is the firm's budget for the marketing endeavor being taken into consideration? Answers to these should go a long way towards ascertaining whether the vendor represents a good fit.

Obviously, cost is also always a consideration. Suppliers that are either much higher or much lower than their competitors should always be viewed at with suspicion. But even more important is the existence or lack of chemistry between the firm's decision makers and the vendor. It is an intangible that is difficult to quantify. Firms must ask themselves whether the vendor matches them in terms of its personal style. A law practice that is by its nature more formal may do well to hire vendors that are similar minded. The same holds true for the practice that has a more casual atmosphere. Flexibility is another key variable...Will the vendor work within the parameters the firm has set and is it able to adjust on the fly when situations change? And last, the least costly, flashiest, most experienced suppliers are worth nothing if they are not serious about simply working hard on the firm's behalf.

Ultimately, in order to get the most out of a marketing firm or consultant, there has to be a true partnership. From a business perspective, the relationship between a law firm and its marketing provider is an *intimate* one. Hence, it's important that that relationship be one of honesty and true benefit. And, if everyone actually likes each other and can also have a little fun along the way...so much the better!

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