

Avoiding Client Reference Fatigue During Awards Season

Law360, New York (October 28, 2011, 12:35 PM ET) -- Attorneys and legal marketing professionals have struggled to balance the proliferation of awards and rankings that have emerged over the past several years, such as "U.S. News & World Report"'s Best Law Firms and other similar programs.

In addition to the burdens and resource challenges that these awards place on marketing professionals, they also bring an unwanted and dangerous trend — client reference fatigue.

Clients who are called upon numerous times in a year to participate in rankings for their outside counsel might provide a less-than-stellar reference, damaging a firm's position in a particular ranking. Even more serious, the constant barrage of requests could jeopardize the relationship between the attorney and the client.

Legal marketing professionals must carefully navigate through the throng of awards and rankings by conducting an aggressive assessment of each opportunity that the firm is able to participate in, creating a strategic and comprehensive communication plan for both attorneys and clients, and coordinating a response initiative which avoids client reference fatigue.

Aggressive Assessment

Marketing professionals are the first line of defense when it comes to awards and rankings. It is essential that we educate ourselves and our attorneys on the pros and cons of each opportunity, recognizing that many awards and lists may not be in the firm's best interest or support a firm's business development goals. One of the most effective ways to do this is to create a spreadsheet of all of the awards and rankings that are available to your firm.

The most critical aspect of any award or ranking is whether or not it fits within the firm's business development plan. As legal marketing professionals, everything we do should support our firm's business development goals.

If the program does not align itself with the strategic business development plans that the firm has developed, then it is likely worth avoiding. If it does, conduct research to determine as many details of what is required as possible.

Don't forget to determine what is required from clients. This includes timetables for interviews, questions that will be asked, and acceptance of supporting materials. By creating a clear picture of what clients will be expected to participate in, attorneys can make a more informed judgment on whether or not the program is worthwhile.

Communication

Communication is essential when discussing awards and rankings. Not only should communication be open and free-flowing with your attorneys, but it also needs to be open with clients.

After compiling your spreadsheet of opportunities, develop a communications calendar with specific dates that show exactly when you will need to engage your attorneys. Be mindful that schedules are in a constant state of fluctuation and that client matters often come up unexpectedly.

A good rule of thumb is to begin communicating two months in advance of the award deadline. When beginning the conversation, give as much information up front as possible and do so in Outlook calendar invites. Thus, your attorneys have a constant reminder of the items they need to provide.

In addition to coordinating with your attorneys, it is essential to put together a calendar of engagement for the firm's clients as well. Draft a letter or email that can be sent to clients outlining the request and providing a timetable in which researchers will call. Also provide an in-depth explanation of what the publication is, why their participation is important to the firm, and what types of questions are usually asked in an interview. Keep communications with clients clear and precise.

Coordinating Client Responses

For the most part, business owners, general counsel, etc. are more than happy to provide references for outside counsel who they see as a valuable part of their organization's success. However, their patience can run thin if they are called upon constantly. Therefore, it is important to create a coordinated response effort so that clients are not burdened.

An important first step in that effort is compiling a list of clients that your attorneys/practice groups have worked with over the past year and the matters that they have undertaken.

Having a good working knowledge of matters upon which the firm has been engaged will allow you to make an informed judgment on who should be on your list for particular awards. You may find that the list is so extensive that client fatigue will not be a problem because a variety of clients can be called upon.

If this is not the case, you need to make sure that the number of award programs that your firm participates in is not burdensome. Clients should typically only be called upon two to three times a year for some sort of reference.

This is where the communication stage of your coordination becomes much more important. Once you have your calendar of opportunities solidified, ask your attorneys to reach out to their clients with a complete list of reference requests for the year. That way you are upfront and clear with expectations. You also can better manage which clients are targeted for which lists and how frequently they are contacted about award references.

Additionally, ask the publication if interviews are a necessity. Most people are surprised to find that many publications do not require an actual interview. Some just require a letter or brief overview of the work that the attorney has done for a client and the value that they brought to a client's business.

If that is the case, ask your attorneys to call upon their clients for a reference letter at the beginning of each year. This will help to mitigate the need for ongoing and follow-up communications concerning client references for awards.

Final Thoughts

Awards and rankings can be an extremely rewarding and beneficial experience for law firms if the submission process is managed appropriately. Following these guidelines will help to alleviate burdens on clients and achieve the results your firm is seeking.

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