

Applying Accounting Firm Methods to Market a Firm Successfully

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Determination, data and deliberation have led an accounting firm marketer Katie Tolin lead her firm to new business, practical training programs, and an innovative rapid-response event that generated hundreds of leads.

It's easy to sum up Marketing Director Katie Tolin by her results:

- Firmwide revenue has doubled from \$15 million to \$30 million since she joined the Rea & Associates, Inc. accounting firm in 2003.
- The firm has a 74% “win rate” for proposals drafted in a process she revamped.
- Since she implemented a sales pipeline, the firm has won more than 400 opportunities and nearly \$8 million in new business.
- More than 800 leads were generated by the firm’s partners in a “Speed Leads” session (similar to “speed dating”) she organized. Two dozen opportunities have already been closed.
- She was named the 2010 Marketer of the Year by the Association for Accounting Marketing in a competition where she was nominated by her peers.” It is her 8th award for marketing excellence.

The Rea Way

You are a Rea ambassador.

Always. Maintain integrity in all you do. Be honest. **Be a good steward.** Take ownership. Respect profitability. **Respect your clients, your colleagues and yourself.** Be generous with praise and constructive with criticism. **Take your work personally.** Quality counts. **Choose to be positive, every day.** Show others that you care. **Work together.** Rejoice in others' achievements. **Embrace change.** Be open to the possibilities. Opportunities abound. **Believe in yourself.** Dare to dream. **Value your clients.** Challenge them to reach their potential. **Be a person of influence.** Share your ideas. Raise up leaders. **Listen intently.** Let your listening fuel action. **Fail Forward.** Be persistent in finding creative solutions. **Invest in your family, your community and your future.** Never stop learning. **Have fun. Enjoy the journey...**

Gung-ho!

Asked to describe herself in one word, she answers “determination.” You will not find a more gung-ho marketer than Katie. She has a framed copy of the firm mission statement “The Rea Way” on her office wall and a wallet card she carries with her. “Personally I try to follow The Rea Way every day,” she said.

Rea & Associates is a public accounting firm with 230 accountants spread across 12 offices in Midwestern Cleveland, Columbus and Northeast Ohio. Each year accounting publications list the firm among the top 100 in the US using various criteria. The firm’s ideal client is a privately-held business, ranging from large companies in major cities to small businesses in the technology-shunning Amish religious community, which don’t use telephones.

“As a marketer, I am first a student and then a teacher,” she said. “I have to learn about what we’re selling, who’s buying, why they buy and what triggers them to do so. Then how do we help them? What is it we do? What’s the end result? Once I fully understand the prospective clients’ needs, I then digest that information and teach others what I’ve learned. I talk to people and not at them. I help them see that we understand their issues and can help solve their problems.”

Katie joined the firm as its first marketing professional after five years as the marketing coordinator for a 40-lawyer law firm. In a nutshell, today she specializes in marketing, public relations, product management and business development. She also works to build a marketing and growth culture, formalize industry niches and assist in the development of the firm’s strategic plan.

Tools for business development

She gives each accountant an oversize, laminated Tips Sheet. It is an at-a-glance reference that summarizes every step an accountant must take for identifying clients at risk, landing big fish and conducting research calls. They also get a pocket-sized Cheat Sheet containing questions that need to be asked in specific situations. The questions can be easily referenced prior to meetings to refresh one’s memory.

She revamped the proposal process by requiring partners to provide the marketing team with answers to a set of specific questions to show that the accountants have done their due diligence. Accountants try to meet at least five to seven times with a prospect before the firm sends in a proposal. “It’s okay to say ‘no’ to an opportunity that isn’t a good fit for our firm,” she added. If it turns out that price is the main criterion, she sends a letter stating the firm’s price and asking whether they’d still like a full proposal.

Once a new-business pursuit is underway, one of the firm’s 12 SWAT Team (Strategic Winning and Training) members is called in to train the accountants, explain the firm’s sales process and coach them on next steps. The SWAT Team includes partners who are proven rainmakers with sales abilities – including Katie.

Her team compiles sales data on a monthly basis that looks at revenue by industry and service. She analyzes this data and shares it with the partner groups. She measures total revenue, average transaction size, number of services purchased by clients and the most popular services purchased by industry.

Sales pipeline

Katie also manages the firm’s pipeline database, an online program on the firm intranet, to track data for larger prospects. At the beginning, the pipeline contained leads equal to 4% of revenue. “Since then, we’ve grown that number to average around 10% and it’s even been as high as 16%,” she said.

The pipeline was augmented massively after a firmwide Growth Summit for partners that she organized last year. The key activity was “Speed Leads,” designed to identify potential clients who were cross selling opportunities for 17 different services. Two participants sat across from each other, and each had to identify a perfect prospect for the other partner. After five minutes, Katie rang a bell and the partners moved so that each was facing a new person. The exercise generated 886 leads. Katie is still working with the partners to whittle down the best 500 leads into the pipeline.

In their evaluations, one partner commented, “Magnificent job. This is the most impressive thing I’ve ever seen.” Another said, “Thank you for planning the Speed Lead program. This proved to be a very interesting event and many leads

exchanged hands. Good work.”

New ideas from an energetic team

The marketing team works with a budget 2.4% of gross revenues, and Katie is quick to credit her colleagues. “The best advice I’ve ever received was to hire smart people and help them be the best professionals they can be,” she said. “I’ve seen the individuals I supervise grow and learn over the years, which is my biggest accomplishment. The whole is only as good as the sum of its parts, and we truly bring out the best in one another,” she said.

Among the team’s practical innovations:

- **Productizing services.** The firm emulates a popular advertising campaign for Progressive Insurance, where customers are shown entering a store, and buying lines of insurance contained in boxes on a shelf. “The customers know exactly what they’re getting,” she said. One firm product is its “Pulse Check Service,” where the CPAs will visit a struggling business and identify ways for it to survive.
- **Determining ROI (return on investment).** For every event, direct mail piece, seminar, trade show booth or other activity, the marketing team totals up the out-of-pocket cost (excluding lost billable time). When a lead comes in, they tag it from the particular event. They determine how much in fees the initiative generated, and decide whether it is profitable to repeat the activity.
- **Goal setting.** The economy and acquisitions have beaten down revenues. In response, firm leadership will establish an overall goal of, say, increasing revenue by 10%. Each service and industry group is asked what they plan to bring in during the year to achieve the goal. The activities of each group are tracked separately like an individual business unit.
- **Leadership Training.** “Rea NextGen” is the firm’s leadership training program, designed to prepare the next generation of leaders within the firm. Firm management selected individuals to participate. Over the course of two years, the CPAs spent 1½ days every other month in class, read assigned books, prepared presentations and completed other assignments. Katie herself is a graduate, the only non-CPA to become one.

“Success is getting the right message in front of the right audience at the right time. If I can do that, I find it personally rewarding and the firm benefits in the process,” Katie said. “While I do look at our growth numbers, the harder measurements are those I find most important. Did I make a difference for someone? Provide them with advice or an idea they implemented? Help them through a troubling time? I don’t often get to hear this stuff firsthand, but when those stories are related back to me through our partners, I feel most successful.”