

The Legal Intelligencer

THE OLDEST LAW JOURNAL IN THE UNITED STATES

ALM

Strategic Marketing Plans Stressed for Midsized Firms

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“Cautious,” “haphazard” and “wasteful” are words that come up often when legal consultants describe the marketing efforts of midsized and small firms.

Despite most midsized and small firms doing activities they consider marketing, the overwhelming sentiment of legal consultants is that those activities are neither strategic nor effective, though there are exceptions.

Legal marketing consultant Stacy Clark estimated that of about 15 firms she worked with, only one has a marketing plan. And without a strategic plan, said Clark and others, most marketing efforts are a waste of time.

“Failing to plan is planning for failure,” said Ellen Freedman of Freedman Consulting.

Smaller firms often assume that because they aren’t megafirms they don’t need to map out a strategy, Freedman said, but that is a mistake.

Without a marketing plan — preferably written down and referenced — firms are oftentimes wasting their time by duplicating efforts in one area while perhaps neglecting another area altogether, she said.

Clark said she recommends that all firms have a plan and that they do not spend any marketing dollars or attorney hours on marketing that doesn’t coincide with the plan. It can be a short one- or two-page plan, she said. But firms with no plan don’t stick to their strategies, and if they do, cannot tie the results to anything, according to Clark.

But before a firm can develop a marketing plan, the firm needs to decide “what”

the firm wants to be, consultants emphasized. Does the firm want to be the top firm in a specific niche, or the go-to full-service firm for a specific geographic area? Whatever the case, marketing consultants stressed the importance of strategizing that identity.

COMMON MISTAKES

When developing marketing activities, consultant Robert Denney said it was important that firms not try to be “all things to all people.”

“Firms should select certain areas and market those extensively to build a reputation locally, regionally and nationally in those areas,” Denney said.

Altman Weil consultant Charles A. Maddock said midsized firms often looked to their competitors or, equally bad, the biggest law firms to come up with marketing strategies.

“The fact is, most law firms don’t really market themselves well. So copying them is not a good idea. And it’s not going to differentiate you from the pack,” Maddock said.

Who’s to say the other firms’ marketing strategies are working for them? Copying other firms will only create activities — the illusion of strategic marketing — and unrealistic expectations, according to Maddock.

Another bad approach is to come up with ways to market that don’t require real attorney time and dedication, Maddock said. Maddock pointed to the surge in large-sign

advertising of law firms in the 1990s. He said he thought most of those ads were not memorable or effective — or part of a strategic plan by the firms.

Maddock said he frequently saw firm hesitation to really invest the time and energy into their marketing activities to ensure those activities achieved the desired result.

For example, Maddock said, firms might join legal networks of some kind because they are looking for referrals. But because

the attorneys don’t take the time to ingratiate themselves with others in the groups, they don’t see results.

And Clark said that a firm simply knowing it wants to increase its revenue a certain percentage is too general a goal. Instead, she said, the “magic is in the specificity.”

One tactic that Klasko said had been particularly effective for the firm was that the partners give speeches and write articles on immigration law topics.

STRATEGIES

Marketing consultants point to a slew of tactics to generate new business or strengthen current relationships. Methods include having attorneys join industry-specific organizations, write in legal and trade publications, sending client-friendly newsletters and alerts, as well as doing advertising campaigns.

The right combination of those tactics depends on the firm and its goal.

One smaller firm with a strategic plan is Klasko Rulon Stock & Seltzer, an immigration boutique.

Klasko Rulon name partner Ronald Klasko said as soon as the firm was founded in 2004 — as a Dechert spin-off — it recognized the need for a marketing plan. Klasko said the firm decided it wanted to be the top immigration firm in the country that dealt with universities and hospitals.

“Rather than being ‘scattershot,’ and spending our marketing dollars on whatever is our whim at given time, we agreed to [specific tactics] as being the primary strategic plan, and every marketing opportunity that comes up, we ask ourselves ‘how does this further or implement our strategic plan?’” Klasko said.

One tactic that Klasko said had been particularly effective for the firm was that the partners give speeches and write articles on immigration law topics.

He also said they often go to universities and hospitals — targeted clients — and make themselves available without charge to give talks to that community — researchers, students, professors, as well as doing individual consultations.

Klasko also said the firm sends an e-mail newsletter and client alerts when appropriate.

Klasko said measuring results is difficult because the firm has so many marketing

efforts, but that the firm’s revenues have consistently increased 10 to 20 percent each year.

He said it was common to get a referral from a person or company the firm had never worked with directly — often because people who have seen someone from the firm speak passed on the name.

“All I know is people and companies keep coming to us and often, we have no idea how they came to us,” Klasko said.

Rawle & Henderson does not have a written marketing plan, but Thomas Kuzmick, senior member of the firm’s executive committee, said it has utilized a strategy to continually market the firm.

The firm defines itself by having first-rate trial attorneys, he said. So, Kuzmick said, the firm focuses its marketing in its areas of specialty, including toxic torts and product liability.

He said the firm used to publish just one newsletter for its clients — *Rawle’s Reports* — but now it puts out industry-specific newsletters for medical health care, such as a commercial motor vehicle newsletter and a medical health care newsletter.

“We’ve found the best results from marketing are when it is focused on a segment of an industry. People want to see that we

have experience in the specialty they are looking for,” Kuzmick said.

He said Rawle & Henderson sends attorneys to trade organization conferences and manufacturing organizations to speak with risk managers and others who confront issues the firm handles.

MEASURING MARKETING SUCCESS

Of course, what works for one firm may not work for another. But by sticking to a plan and modifying it as necessary, consultants said it was possible to quantify marketing success.

Since marketing plans are all generally geared toward client development, Clark suggested keeping track of new clients and referral sources to have something to reference when evaluating progress.

She said firms could also keep a count of on-site visits with clients, the number of mentions in newspapers and other media, and calls derived from ads to assess improvement.

Clark also emphasized the need to repeatedly publicize the results of marketing efforts within a firm to keep everyone on board.

“Success breeds action, which breeds more success,” she said. •