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LEGAL MARKETING

Marketing Lessons From a Powerhouse Female Rainmaker

BY STACY WEST CLARK

Special to the Legal

I have known Cheryl Nicolson for over 10 years. I thought I should tell her story as she has done what very few lawyers that I know have done. She started her firm, Nicolson Law Group, with one client, Electrolux Home Products, in 2008. She came from big law. Today, a decade later, her partial client list includes 10 Fortune 500/Global 500 companies the likes of which include: The Coca-Cola Co., Electrolux Home Products, Ingersoll Rand Co., Rockwell Automation, Target and USAA.

Did I mention her office is in Media and she also has another office outside Los Angeles? That's right, a woman-owned firm based in Delaware County boasts this incredible marquee client list and revenues that would be the envy of major law firms in U.S. cities.

How did she do it?

Nicolson was an associate—yes associate—lawyer at Cozen O'Connor and left to practice part-time with a small firm and have her two children. Over the course of the four years she



STACY WEST CLARK

has been helping Pennsylvania lawyers and law firms successfully expand their practices and grow revenues for over 25 years. She is a former attorney with Morgan, Lewis & Bockius and was

its first marketing director. She is president of Stacy Clark Marketing: www.stacyclarkmarketing.com.

was there, she noticed that while she was bringing in over a \$1 million in work, she was being paid maybe 10 percent of that. Knowing that she knew how to develop business, she knew she could do it on her own. So she left—with one other attorney, Melissa Yemma, and a secretary—and started her firm.

As she tells it, she was growing a dream. The famous line from the beloved movie, "Field of Dreams," "if you build it, they will come," could not have been truer. As she explains "The dream was about building a firm that would enable us to be financially responsible to ourselves and our families; it was about serving clients in a dynamic way, which meant finding ways to do the work more efficiently

and for less than our larger firm competitors; it was about excellence and responsiveness in a low overhead, high value environment.

"We opened our doors in June of 2008 when the economy was crashing and many self-insured manufacturers and big box retailers were being forced to cut their legal spends under the weight of a contracting market. We were in the right place at the right time to capitalize on opportunities driven by market forces. We had experience with Global 500/Fortune 500 clients, but we didn't have the high price tags of lawyers in larger firms. While early market forces gave us an edge, it was our approach to our clients' needs that converted market opportunity to real business for our firm and it is that approach that sustains our growth today and regularly includes alternative dispute resolution strategies and alternative fee agreements."

Today the firm has 15 lawyers, four paralegals and 11 nonlawyers in administration and support roles. Right now, the firm has over 600 open matters. The firm has been successful in winning many defense verdicts

for its clients. Nicolson believes her clients welcome her firm's help due to "results, trust, loyalty, diligence and value."

So what are some key business development takeaways from Nicolson's incredible rainmaking success? Overall, Nicolson personifies the traits that major business developers possess such as the following:

A law firm leader should have incredible drive and a desire to always win. In person, Nicolson always has the eye of the tiger and at the same time displays a personality brimming with optimism and confidence. When you meet her, you just feel she can win your case. She wears her excitement—to be in her clients' presence—visibly on her sleeve.

Her firm recognizes the value of focusing on profitable niche practices. Nicolson Law's website boasts the sentence: "We don't do everything but what we do, we do exceptionally well." The firm has eight litigation specialty practices where they have deep industry understanding. They include: products liability, retail liability, transportation, construction, subrogation, insurance defense, commercial property, mass tort litigation, business litigation, real estate litigation and school law.

Planes, trains and automobiles are needed to grow and thrive a national defense litigation practice. Nicolson regularly visits her clients' headquarters around the country, on her own nickel, to check in on and strengthen relationships.

She has superior listening skills. She regularly follows the 90/10 rule where she listens to what people are

saying 90 percent of the time and speaks for 10 percent. You always feel like you are the only client or friend or acquaintance she has.

Her firm has grown by doing a tremendous amount of repeat business for her core group of clients. The 80/20 rule really is at work here. Moreover, her client list continues to grow from clients' referrals—to their fellow in-housers in corporate America.

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Nicolson is a "connector." Connectors are people who know scores of people in diverse businesses and industries—who go out of their way to help you connect with someone you need—such as the name of a top professional in any field that she knows. Her rolodex is huge and literally, you ask her for the name of a top trainer, or divorce lawyer or accountant or art dealer and she will get you their contact information and make a bridge for you to meet them—within minutes of the request. In his book, "Never

Eat Alone," Keith Ferrazzi makes a strong case for showing how super connectors, like Nicolson, are successful. As he writes, "They're the people ... who know and connect people from all walks of life, and they're essential to growing your network—whatever your mission in life."

Nicolson and her team—including her physical space—display what Dennis Snow, in his book, "Lessons From the Mouse: A Guide for Applying Disney World's Secrets to Your Organization, Career and Your Life," refers to as the "wow" factor to the entire client experience. Nicolson Law over-performs in the courtroom—but the wow experience begins the minute you enter her Media offices. As Snow says: "Everything speaks" including her state-of-the-art airy physical space. They are quite simply gorgeous, replete with interesting art and barn doors and a modern meeting room with couches set out to encourage collaboration and conversation and a staff-friendly kitchen. Because the offices are so cutting edge—you instantly and without a word feel, that there is magic going on inside.

If you want a lesson in how to develop a practice from one client to multiple of the best of the Fortune 500, you'd be wise to keep Nicolson and her firm on your radar. You can do it, too. I am rooting for you! •