Tips for Marketing Your Law Practice in a Tight Economy

By Terrie S. Wheeler, MBC, founder and president of MarketYourLawPractice.com

During a tight economy, attorneys feel the pinch as much as anyone else in business. Whether you are a solo practitioner or working in a small law firm, you face the dilemma of reaching revenue goals in an economy that is less than friendly. However, you can rest assured that by "getting back to the basics," you will be putting your energy in the right place.

This article, based on the Four Pillars of Marketing℠, is meant to remind the seasoned attorney - - and focus the newer attorney - - on what to do to develop business—even when the economy is not on your side. *The Four Pillars of Marketing* refer to marketing best practices you should focus your efforts around:

I. Retain and Grow Relationships with your Existing Clients and Contacts

II. Attract New Clients and Develop New Business

III. Increase Name Recognition and Awareness

IV. Create Targeted and Effective Communications

A balanced marketing strategy will contain tactics from each of the Four Pillars of Marketing. Consider the following tips below as you plan for 2009:

Pillar I – Retain and Grow Relationships with Existing Contacts

Tip #1 – Keep Your Eye on the Ball

Develop a strategy that allows you to set realistic goals—and to support those goals with cost-effective marketing and communications strategies. Take the opportunity to step back from your day-to-day practice and reassess what has made you successful to date. Take an in-depth look at last year's revenue. How does it compare to past years? From what types of matters or cases did your revenue come? What services are most profitable for you? What industries are you serving? Build your 2009 marketing strategies around the best of what has worked for you in the past.

Tip #2 – Focus on Relationship Building

The vast majority of your clients have likely come from referrals. Past clients, other professionals, industry associations, friends, family, and business associates have all contributed to your current success. How often do you touch base with these people? Make a list of everyone with whom you'd like to reconnect in 2009, and call a few people each week just to say "hello" and to check in to see how they are doing. Meet for breakfast, coffee, or lunch. Staying connected to the great people you have met throughout your career will lead to opportunities you may never have imagined.

Tip #3 – When in Doubt, Ask Your Clients

Before moving forward on a new marketing campaign, expanding into another market, or launching a new service, consult with your clients. Many lawyers and law firms have benefited from conducting client surveys or interviews. Particularly in a tight economy, you need to know your clients' perceptions and what is important to them..

Tip #4 – Be a Stickler for Responsiveness

If a client or contact calls you, call them back. If they send you an email, respond—the same day. Even if you have no news to report to an existing client, call them back. A tight economy generally creates more competition. One variable you have complete control of - - even in a tight economy - - is the service-oriented focus you provide your clients and contacts each day.

Tip #5 – Clarify, Then Exceed Your Clients' Expectations

Early in the relationship, clarify what clients expect from you as their lawyer. Find out how they want you to communicate with them, how much detail they want in their invoices, how they want you to provide updates in the laws that affect them. You should even find out what frustrates them about having to deal with lawyers. Every client will have different expectations (and baggage from past relationships they have had with attorneys). It is your job as a service provider to clarify expectations with a goal of exceeding them.

Pillar II - Develop New Business

Tip #6 – Know the Criteria for Your "Ideal" Client

When building a law practice, it is important to attract the right kind of clients—not just clients who can pay your fees. Think for a moment about your very best clients. Now think of clients you wish you weren't working with. Create a list of attributes of your best clients. What characteristics do they have in common? How were they attracted to you? Why do you like working with them over other clients? Make it a goal to grow your practice by selectively adding clients you know are a good fit - - those who meet the criteria you have established for your "A-level clients".

Tip # 7 – Target Your Audience *and* Your Message

Based on the results of your A-level client criteria, identify types of clients who utilize the best and highest use of your knowledge and experience when you work with them. What characteristics do they have in common (age, geographic location, company type, industry affiliation, who referred them to you, results you generated for them)? For each audience group, develop messages that answer the question, "Why should I hire YOU?" Focus your key "hire me" messages around the value you bring to your clients, the proven experience you have developed in certain areas, your client's satisfaction with your work, the results you generate, and other specific proof supporting why you are the best choice for this type of client to hire.

Tip #8 – Focus on your Top Ten Lists

Track the logical flow of developing new business by making the process manageable. First, identify the top ten prospective clients you would like to attract. Next, identify your top ten current clients. Finally, identify your top ten referral sources. You now have 30 individuals and/or companies to focus on in 2009. Spend a few minutes putting a plan in place to connect with each person over the next 12 months. Think of those you know in your network who might introduce you to a key prospective client. Plan to attend an industry event with a client or with one of your best referral sources. Spend time with these people and focus on asking great questions, and listening to their responses. You have to listen for opportunities in order to turn those opportunities into new business.

Pillar III – Increase your Name Recognition

Tip #9 – Stay Involved in Your Community

If you're not already involved in your local community, consider becoming active in the Chamber of Commerce or the Rotary. Also remember that nonprofit organizations—especially during tough times—want and need dedicated volunteers. What organization in your community interests you? Is it a local food shelf, your place or worship, or an arts organization? Ask colleagues and clients about volunteer and nonprofit board opportunities they might suggest. You will be happily surprised at the number of other professionals who also take an interest in their community. Being an exceptional volunteer translates in the eyes of your fellow board members as, "Joe/Janice must also be an excellent lawyer!"

Tip #10 – Focus on the Media, Not on Advertising

Have you asked your clients how they originally found you? More than likely it will not be because of an ad you placed in the local paper. When the economy is tight, a much more credible and cost-effective way to increase your name recognition is through public relations. Pay attention to the news media and reporters covering the industries you represent. Four concepts to keep in mind:

1. Keep members of the media current on happenings at your firm (through regular news releases)

2. Talk to editors and reporters about being a knowledgeable source they can consult when covering stories involving your highest-level expertise

3. Develop a timely and relevant story angle and "pitch" editors and reporters to interview you

4. Identify specific ideas for articles you believe their readers, viewers or listeners need to know, contact the editors, and tell them why you are the best attorney to write an article or to be interviewed on the given topic.

Tip #11 – Join a Trade Association and Be Active

Based on your Top Ten lists, ask your clients, contacts and referral sources what trade and/or professional associations they belong to. Join one and make a point of attending the events and meeting other members. Offer to write for their publication, and speak at their events. Become THE legal resource for their members. Perception is reality and if members of an industry group perceive you have more knowledge of their business because of your involvement in their industry group, they will hire you over other lawyers they do not perceive know their industry.

Pillar IV – Communicate in a Targeted Fashion

Tip #12 – Continue Communicating with Your Clients

Look at the target audiences you have identified above and again consult your Top Ten lists. Identify information that is timely and relevant to each group, and create audience-specific communications. Don't succumb to the "firm newsletter" approach. Make sure your communications with clients, contacts and referral sources are targeted to their unique needs, and are personalized to each individual. This is one of the only ways to rise above being perceived as junk mail (email or US mail!). Communicate regularly with fewer groups, but make your communications extremely relevant to each.

Tip #13 – Use Your Invoices as a Marketing Tool

Each month you have the opportunity to communicate the value you deliver to clients through the invoices you send. Take the extra time to provide a detailed summary of time spent on your client's behalf. Make sure the process and outcome justify the fees. Prepare your invoices from a client's perspective. If you received an invoice "for services rendered" or for "meeting with Joe," would you feel good about paying the bill? Probably not. Show your clients through your detailed time reporting that everything you do is well thought out, and part of the broader whole - - to help them achieve the results they hired you for.

Tip #14 – Don't Just Tell Them, Show Them!

How convincing are your marketing materials? Do you simply convey a long list of legal services you offer? Would you hire a doctor based on his or her list of services? It's unlikely you would. Clients are no different. They want to see you have done what they need. Focus on providing representative examples of your expertise. Don't just create a list of services, show prospective clients and referral sources that you have the breadth and depth of experience required to work with them based largely on your past successes. Create representative experience that summarizes the client's situation, your approach to the problem, and the solution. Results sell!

Tip #15 – How Is Your Website?

One of the most cost-effective communication tools you have is your website. Through your website you provide clients and referral sources access to information they need to know about you and your practice. You can also tie your website into the other targeted communications you have with your clients by posting relevant legal updates on your website, then sending an email to select clients and contacts with a link to that information on your site. No need to budget for glitzy glossy brochures - - put your time and energy into building a website that showcases your expertise.

Terrie S. Wheeler, MBC, developed and launched www.MarketYourLawPractice.com, an online interactive tool designed to help lawyers effectively and ethically develop new business. Wheeler has 25 years of experience as a marketing consultant, coach, and law firm marketing director, and holds a Master's degree in business and marketing.

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