

## **BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT BEYOND THE CLIENT LUNCH**

Most lawyers find marketing their legal expertise a struggle. This is not surprising as there is nothing in the lawyer's professional background or training that prepares him for marketing his services in the competitive environment that characterizes today's legal services market. No lawyer starts in the legal profession aiming to become a salesman.

For lawyers who are wary about "cheapening" the profession through traditional advertising mediums and who do not possess a sizeable marketing budget that these avenues demand; this article will show you that marketing is more a matter of commitment of time rather than of financials. There is also much more to marketing legal services than the occasional client lunch.

### **MARKET TO EXISTING CLIENTS**

The Pareto Principle holds that, over time, most results are produced by causes in a proportion to 80:20. In terms of a legal practice, it means that 80% of the firm's revenue is produced by 20% of its clients. Therefore your existing clients should be the focus of your business development efforts. Do you know who your top clients are? What businesses are they in? Existing clients are a potent source of repeat business. Yet few practices deploy a strategic plan for offering more services to their clients after the close of their case files. For most law practices, attempts to "keep in touch" with clients is an ad-hoc affair involving no more than a greeting card at Christmas.

#### **Focus on the Client**

Marketing to existing clients involves taking time to understand your client's business and where it is headed; and organizing your practice to profitably service their needs holistically. A thorough understanding of your client's business will present opportunities to offer a wider range of legal services to the client. Unfortunately, many lawyers do not take time to understand their client's business and are ill equipped to cross-sell according to a strategic plan designed to keep the client tied to you. Surveys show that the two biggest reasons for client dissatisfaction are unhappiness with the practice's service performance and failure to keep pace with the client's changing needs.

Like all service professionals, the fee earner is judged on more than his technical competency – in fact, technical competency is assumed, as your client will expect no less.

#### **Focus on Service Delivery**

Many lawyers do not see how investing in improving service delivery; whether in training, salaries or increased staffing; will earn them more. Yet there are so many ways to fall short – from the way your staff answers the telephone to how you monitor case deadlines. Providing good service is much more than a matter of professional etiquette, it is a business imperative.

The first step to providing good service is being prepared to spend time and resources getting it right. Needless to say, managing partners are ultimately responsible for inculcating a culture of "client-centric" awareness within the practice. If valuing your clients is paramount in your practice, set the tone so that your staff recognize its importance.

Starting with your reception area and your frontline staff –

- \* Does your reception area (and your receptionist) look sharp and presentable?
- \* Do your frontline staff greet all visitors with courtesy and helpfulness?
- \* Does your secretary understand the importance of her role in client relationship management? Does she treat all clients of the practice with respect and civility?
- \* Do you include client service in your staff induction and in-house training programs?

Next, examine your internal processes to see if they meet your exacting standards of service delivery –

- \* How easy is it for your client to reach you? Are they made to run a gauntlet of secretaries and voice recordings?
- \* How quickly do you (or your staff) respond to a client's request for billing status and case progress reports?
- \* How closely do you supervise staff and junior associates to ensure the quality of legal service is of the standard you profess?

## **INSTITUTIONALISE “RAIN MAKING” IN YOUR PRACTICE**

The managing partners of the practice, in their role as business owners, need to make clear that marketing is the responsibility of every fee-earner, and not only for the fee-earner's services but across the gambit of legal services that the practice offers.

Take a hard look at the fundamentals of your practice management style. Is marketing the practice the frosting on the cake delegated to a few key stakeholders at the top of the pyramid or is it an essential ingredient in the baking?

Where fee earners are uncomfortable with the notion of “cultivating” a client, the practice can assist by institutionalizing client communication strategies designed to make the client feel valued as well as to ensure that opportunities are not lost. For example, devise a simple client feedback form and incorporate the client feedback interview into your file closing process; schedule a call when client's mortgage term expires; offer to write / review your client's will when they buy a new house or get divorced.

If client development is important to your practice's future, consider ways in which your compensation system motivates marketing activities; including rewarding your lawyers for bringing in new clients. Associate evaluation and compensation programs can be instituted to recognize individual efforts that support the practice's client development and marketing goals.

## **LITTLE OR NO COST MARKETING THROUGH THE MEDIA**

There are many avenues to market your expertise that cost little or nothing at all except in time and commitment. These include legal blogs (these are called “blawgs”), contributing to a legal column for a lifestyle magazine, writing to the forum section of the local newspapers, and answering legal Q&As in consumer publications. Media coverage increases visibility and augments your profile as a specialist in your legal field, yet most lawyers I know are shy of “media” publicity.

Being “in the news” (for the right reasons) is indisputably one of the most effective ways to achieve recognition for your practice. Solo and Small Practice lawyers should take the opportunity to become acquainted with reporters covering the legal beat – whether criminal law, consumer rights or business news; it is not inappropriate to provide expert background on topics within the ambit of your specialty.

## **MARKET WHILE YOU SLEEP**

Some solo and small practice lawyers still hold firm to their belief that an internet presence merely leads to more nuisance calls rather than more business; preferring to rely on traditional methods such as personal and word-of-mouth referrals. A few are happy to announce that they have enough work, thank you very much, and don't need market themselves. In which case, you will not be interested to learn that other lawyers have discovered that their corporate website or legal blog helps them to market while they sleep.

Increasingly, the internet is the first port of call when looking for information. A business prospect looking up a lawyer he was referred to or met briefly at a networking event will generally start with an internet search engine. You can easily assume that he is not aware that the law society has an online directory of lawyers.

For this reason, we believe that no matter how established a law practice is, an omission (your prospective client not finding your practice on the internet) is likely to leave an adverse impression – that you are not a serious business undertaking with a sterling professional reputation and a credible client list. As a supplier of professional services, lacking a corporate website in this internet age simply spells “unprofessional”.

We conducted a survey of law practices on the internet. Out of 726 law practices surveyed, 528 of these practices do not have a website. This means that less than 27% of law practices have a website. The percentage in relation to small law practices is in fact much higher as most of the existing law practice websites belong to larger practices. This represents a tremendous advantage for solo and small practices wishing to gain market exposure. As a website is likely to cost less than glossy print brochures or a paid directory listing, the cost effective nature of marketing through the internet is one of the few ways to level the playing field amongst large and small practices.

## DEPLOY BUSINESS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

Anyone in business today will understand the value of a “network”. Participation in network partnerships can help you meet people and build mutually beneficial business relationships. Most inspirational business stories involve the inestimable value of making connections and of facilitating connections. Effective networking means building relationships of trust and mutual support; meaning network not only for your own business, but for your clients as well. Whom do you know may be able to help your client’s business? Can you send business his way? By showing your interest in helping your client succeed, you can be sure that he will think of you when he needs legal advice or contracts drawn up for his business.

Where to start? Join any one of the growing number of business associations such as ASME, the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce or Singapore Business Federation. Or think further afield - having participated in networking events conducted by highly successful business networking organizations such as BNI and Barter Exchange, I can vouch that lawyers are poorly represented in such organizations. There is likely to be ten times more accounting and corporate secretarial firms in the membership than legal services professionals. This represents a valuable untapped opportunity for a solo or small practice lawyer trying to extend his reach outside his immediate social circles.

A note of caution if you are thinking of joining a charitable or non profit organisation for the opportunity to make new business contacts - if you do not believe in the group’s mission, the commitment of time required of your participation may lead to apathy and less than whole-hearted involvement. This will be far more damaging to your reputation than what you hope to gain in terms of business leads through the group.

## CONCLUSION

When you have instilled the proactive discipline of cultivating awareness of the importance of client retention and business development within your practice, you can start focusing on little or no cost “outreach” programs. Joining a business networking club, milking the “publicity machine” and marketing your services on the internet might take you out of your comfort zone; but if you are serious about growing your business, these are opportunities that will surely take you further than the occasional client lunch.

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AUTHOR: Sylvia Low, Director, Bizibody Technology | [www.bizibody.biz](http://www.bizibody.biz)

Contact her at [sylvia@bizibody.biz](mailto:sylvia@bizibody.biz)