Formalize Your Marketing Plan: Nonbillable Marketing Contributes to the Firm’s Bottom Line

By Paramjit Mahli

Many lawyers enjoy practicing law much more than they enjoy running and building a business. Considering their training, it’s no surprise that lawyers don’t want to do any business planning. Yet study after study has shown that those with formalized plans — for business or life — are more likely to succeed than those without such plans.

Business planning need not be complicated. Andrea Combs, staff reporter for the Wall Street Journal, in a June 3, 2007, article entitled “Starting a Business? Don’t Do This,” points out that only 44% of small businesses with more than one employee survive after the first four years. Her article states that two of the biggest mistakes contributing to this statistic are the lack of a detailed marketing plan and the failure to seek advice from seasoned professionals.

Stephen R. Covey, author of The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, published by Free Press in 1989, says to “begin with the end in mind.” Simply put, starting a business without a plan is like going to London without knowing how you are going to get there, where you are going to stay, or what you are going to do and see. Most of us are just not that adventurous and can’t imagine taking off to a foreign location without some sort of plan.

Of course, some think that formulating a plan in your head is good enough. Wrong. You don’t see the holes, gaps, and pitfalls. Getting it out of your head and onto paper is not as overwhelming as you may perceive it to be.

Not all strategic marketing plans are about growth. Objectives can range from focusing on building and developing relationships with your current client base to solidifying your referral networks to making sure infrastructure exists to support growth.

It’s almost certain that any legal-marketing plan will fail without proper support from all managing partners and without the right structure. Managing partners need to understand the importance of marketing and must be able to explain why marketing is crucial to the growth of the firm. Nonbillable marketing contributes to the firm’s bottom line and helps measure compensation for everyone, including the office administration support staff and marketing professionals.

Experienced marketing professionals can help educate, train, and guide the key players who will be building the firm’s relationships and boosting business development. Attorneys will inevitably have to broaden their skill sets beyond practicing law. Firms should have tailored networking plans, become sources for the press, write articles for publications geared toward their target markets, and speak at seminars and industry-related events.

Having the right structure in place will help the firm measure the effectiveness of its marketing plan. One of the most successful approaches to marketing is the use of practice groups, highlighted by Patrick McKenna and David Maister in their book First Among Equals, published by Free Press in 2002. For any firm, practice groups are the most successful way to structure marketing. Each group has a specific target audience and a specific set of skills and techniques.

The following are fundamental to the success of a marketing plan:

1. Identify and prioritize the firm’s objectives. All the firm’s efforts must be focused on what will do the most good — saving time, money, and resources rather than practicing random acts of marketing and business development.

2. Create a position statement outlining benefits that the practice groups offer their target markets. Clarity will eliminate any mixed messages sent to prospects.

3. Outline how results will be measured.

4. Incorporate marketing strategies indicating where and how the firm’s prospects get their information.
Once you have a strategic plan in place (the big picture), you need to evaluate your marketing model. This is a good indicator of how likely you are to meet your objectives.

Take a long look at all your marketing tactics; what may have worked very well in the past may no longer work at this stage of growth. Understand the difference between advertising and public relations. Name recognition does not automatically mean a good reputation. Reputation has to be tied to the value of the services the firm is known for.

Lead-generation systems must run smoothly. If they don’t, take steps to make them work cohesively and effectively together. Tweak your weakest public relations tactics (speaking, writing, networking, etc.). Set deadlines to help get tasks performed, especially if evaluation periods are looming. Leverage your marketing so that everything is working in sync.

Finally, it’s important to understand that there really is nothing new in marketing. Regardless of which marketing tactics you choose, the keys to the success of your marketing are consistency and making adjustments when the need arises. More is not necessarily better; doing a few things right is not only considerably cheaper but far more effective. Looking for the latest marketing gimmick is a sure way to fail and demonstrates a lack of thoughtfulness. Formalizing a marketing plan is about knowing your strengths and weaknesses and asking for help.

**About the Author**

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