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Management

Devoured by Time

With all the emphasis on billable hours, why don't attorneys keep better track of their time?

By NEIL QUATEMAN and
LAWRENCE M. KOHN

Attorneys who want to get paid for the work they do for their clients must, rather obviously, first send them an invoice, and before that, collect and record time spent on client matters. Why is it that keeping track of time is so hard?

There are some obvious barriers that get in the way of timekeeping. For example, it's boring and you're busy. This is particularly true if you get behind in

Calculations

tracking your time. You've got your clients to service, business to develop, and a personal life to lead. When you have to collect and record past activity from days (or perhaps weeks) ago, it's easy to find something more interesting to do.

And, there's no apparent money to be made in the time spent rehashing your recollections about the work that has gone by. You can't bill for the time you spend recording your work. This is a task that comes with the line of work that you're in.

UNDERSTANDING PROCRASTINATION

There's also another set of deterrents that may be getting in the way of documenting your work. Recording your time means justifying your value to your client. It means justifying the price that you charge. It means quantifying and describing just what it is that will benefit your client.

If there's a question in your mind about that value, or your pricing, then describing the work you've done will not be an appealing task. You'll delay it and put it off as long as possible in order to avoid facing the ambivalence that you feel

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about conveying this information to the client.

So what is it that can help you get this chore done, and how will it be valuable to you and your client? The bill you send should reflect your respect for the relationship that you have with your client. It is an opportunity to communicate your expertise and the unique abilities that you have to offer.

If you are making a contribution to solving the problems that face your client, in the invoice you can "describe your efforts to analyze options and resolve the dispute." If you are negotiating the best position or contract price, in the invoice you can "outline the strategy for most favorable or most advantageous terms." Or, if you are brainstorming as a part of a business-building team, in the invoice you can "consider legal issues pertaining to business development plans."

The merit of your assistance is in communication with your client, and recording your time is an excellent tool to help you accomplish that.

MEANS TO AN END

Another way to help your timekeeping effort is the mechanical process itself. This should be as convenient as possible for both the attorney and the staff members processing the time.

Attorneys should be able to record

their time in the manner they are most comfortable with. That could mean handwritten timesheets, it could be entries made directly into the attorney's computer, or dictating time records for transcription later. Attorneys who are frequently out of the office should have the appropriate means to keep track of their time with a notebook or pocket computer, a paper timesheet, or a calendar or diary.

The systems that your secretary or accounting staff use to handle time reports can also aid in the efficient production of the timekeeper's records. The firm's billing system should have the capability to assign the correct rates for each client and timekeeper without requiring a search procedure by a staff member.

The management of the client list is another area for time savings. If the firm uses numbers to identify the clients, then both a numerically and alphabetically sorted client list will help the staff in entering and managing the time data.

Deciphering the attorney's handwriting frequently seems to be at the top of the problem list for administrative staffers when working with time entries, so the timekeepers should be asked to keep that in mind when writing up their activities and notating references to client names or numbers.

The reporting and reviewing process for time entries can be established to help

the attorneys, the administrative staff and the firm's managers. For example, generating weekly reports of an attorney's time will flag delinquent timekeepers who must be chased for their entries, and it will lower the periodic volume of review for each attorney.

PURSuing THE PROBLEM

Weekly reports can be particularly effective in pursuing the problem timekeeper. A secretary, or perhaps one of the firm's managers, can be responsible for monitoring the reports, if necessary on a daily basis, of an attorney that won't comply with the firm's policies.

Failure to report is irresponsible behavior that could significantly hamper the viability of the firm. A peer review, or management review, may be necessary to emphasize that this is not an issue that can be dealt with casually by the firm. If the firm meets more frequent reporting schedules, it will provide timely data on the status of the firm's work in process and be an aid to monitoring or responding to the progress of a client's matter.

Tracking your time has obstacles associated with it. It will force you to define and document the value and worth of your efforts to both yourself and your client. It will require you to address and organize the administrative process relating to the collection of your time.

If there's a question about your value or price, you'll delay billing to avoid facing the ambivalence you feel about conveying this information to the client.

But timetracking is also an opportunity: It is an opportunity to show the firm's pride in its relationship with its clients, and it is an opportunity to improve the management of your firm. If you take advantage of this perspective, it may establish a new way of approaching this otherwise undesirable task.

MARKETING

Letters, lunches, logic reap rewards for professionals

BY LAWRENCE M. KOHN

Effective marketing for professionals does not demand a big budget.

Actually, some of the most effective marketing efforts cost no more than the expense of writing a letter or making a telephone call. The purpose of this article is to identify some of the marketing techniques that don't cost an arm and a leg, but will keep you ahead of the competition.

In order to win clients, you have to convince them that you are worthy of their attention. Therefore, effective marketing becomes the task of proving your ability to perform.

Do good work

Obviously, the best marketing technique is doing good work. Nothing beats the benefits of being paid to demonstrate your skills. Contented clients tell their friends. Performance in the past is prima facie evidence that you'll continue to be effective in the future.

Educate your prospects

When you educate your targets, you help them while you position yourself as an expert.

Education is one of the greatest gifts. When you give away knowledge, you do not deplete your inventory. When you invest in educating others, you earn their interest. You can teach by speaking to trade associations, charities, schools, religious organizations and service clubs.

A few rules will make the experience valuable for you as well as the audience:

✓ Pick the right group. I recently met a lawyer who was speaking to his peers working in the same specialty. His efforts were appreciated, but not generating revenue. He was educating his competition instead of his prospects.

✓ Be a good speaker. Get some training, join Toastmasters and practice speaking in front of a mirror. You don't need to tell jokes, but you do need to offer content in a manner that will keep your audience nodding in agreement instead of just nodding.

✓ Write articles. Articles document your knowledge and create tangible evidence of your ability to perform. Here's a tip: while many professionals write for publications, not as many write for their targets. Write articles for trade journals, magazines and newspapers. Don't be afraid to call editors and inquire about their publishing requirements. Send your articles or send a query letter describing articles you would like to write.

You would be surprised how the right editor will welcome your submission. Once you're published, you can send reprints to your clients and referral sources. You'll get a lot of mileage out of a published article because you'll share your knowledge with a targeted audience and enjoy the credibility of "third-party endorsement."

Do good deeds

One of the most effective marketing techniques is also one of the most personally fulfilling — helping others.

As you perform charitable deeds you prove your ability to offer value. I have three suggestions to maximize your marketing through charity.

✓ Choose an appropriate charity. The charities of your targets will give you exposure as you give your energy.

✓ Pick a high-profile position. Don't tuck yourself into some quiet cranny. Get on the greeting committee.

✓ Pick a charity you believe in. This kind of marketing must come from the heart. Some of your peers may frown on participating in charity with a commercial motive. However, it's my belief that a charity will benefit by your involvement regardless of your motive and there is nothing wrong with doing well by doing good.

Communicate with reporters

When you have information that is interesting to your prospects, it may be interesting to reporters who cover that industry. When you read an article that you find interesting in your area of expertise, write to the reporter and introduce yourself. Be sure to spell names correctly and enclose materials that you have, to document your expertise.

Enclose your biography and your reprints. You can even call and say hello. Compliment them on their style and invite them to lunch. Develop friendships. The next time the same subject comes up, guess who gets the quote?

Network more effectively

The next time you enter a room full of strangers, don't stand on the sidelines. There are prospects poised for pursuit. The difficulty with networking is that it is perceived as a social experience. There is a fear of appearing socially inept. The solution is to look at networking as a research experience. Your task is to find out who is in the room and how you can benefit from each other.

There are four questions to ask your acquaintance that will facilitate your efforts:

✓ What do you do?

✓ How do you offer value to your clients?

✓ Who are your clients?

✓ Who refers business to you?

The answers to these questions will quickly tell you whether or not the new name should be merged into your mailing list for future solicitation. Also, your ability to answer those same four questions will help you communicate your value to those you meet. One suggestion regarding working a room: Go for volume.

You'll have plenty of time to establish relationships with those you've met, but the strangers in the room may never cross your path again.

Enjoy a free lunch

This technique actually eliminates the myth that there is no such thing as a free lunch. Most professionals entertain pros-

pects or referral sources by taking them to lunch. If you usually take one target to lunch each week, I recommend that you stop for a month. Then, at the end of the month, take four targets out to lunch together. Make sure that they complement each others' careers and would be interested in meeting. Try a banker, insurance agent, real estate broker and an accountant.

By taking all four to lunch at the same time, you have saved the cost of three lunches you would have spent on yourself had you entertained them individually. That's three free lunches. The free lunches offset the cost of the three lunches in your month-end get-together. But, the value doesn't end there. By bringing together quality individuals, you create valuable introductions. When introductions become income, your referrals become receivables. There is a balance in business and if you give, you can expect to receive.

Share your secrets

There are many other marketing techniques that stimulate success. Each professional has his own methods for penetrating prospects, but holding regular monthly meetings is the key to an effective firmwide marketing effort.

The meetings are most productive when they are structured and directed by someone with some marketing savvy. Monthly meetings motivate the entire organization. Participants can share their successes and analyze their failures. They can develop new services for existing clients and target new markets.

Without a regular monthly meeting, procrastination prevails. Great ideas are never implemented and programs are put on hold. Professionals must commit to their marketing activities in the presence of their peers and be held accountable in future meetings.

Marketing is not magic. It is simply the system of identifying value for a target, documenting your ability to provide it and then delivering on the promise. You can do it yourself or you can delegate it to others. In either case, the secret is in the doing. And, once you begin, you'll find marketing to be fun, fulfilling and financially rewarding.



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