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LEARNING TO MARKET: THE EDUCATED ALTERNATIVE

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As with all other professions, the marketing of law firms is evolving. When the need to build practices became apparent, public relations firms were the first to assist. While some public relations firms have satisfied their clients, many have had little success. Too often, fees paid only produced bad PR for PR firms.

It was clear that classic public relations didn't fill the needs of professionals for many reasons. First, the cost of hiring a PR firm is high for those who are new to marketing. Fees of \$1,000 to \$10,000 per month are big budget items for unproven concepts or unclear benefits. Second, PR providers often overestimate their ability to perform. And third, success is difficult to measure.

To deal with this dilemma, we began implementing an alternative approach for marketing professional services. Instead of offering PR, we began teaching professionals how to market themselves. We established a program of consistent, on-site, monthly marketing meetings.

Unlike self-run firm marketing meetings in which partners pontificate about their marketing successes, this approach installs experienced trainers who coach individuals on specific tasks that, when completed, generate positive results. For example, participants can learn how to communicate with the press; target and penetrate trade associations; network more effectively; write articles; give speeches; and produce newsletters.

Before professionals learn to market, the whole concept of marketing seems so overwhelming that it's almost impossible to begin. However, as they learn to segment the effort into individual tasks, the experience becomes manageable. When professionals stop procrastinating and get pro-active, things begin to happen immediately. While some projects may be long term in nature, the personal involvement of the individual eliminates the impatience.

Also, the skills that are learned continue to provide valuable marketing tools for an entire career.

The difference between classic PR and the teaching of marketing is communicated in the ancient Chinese proverb; If you give a man fish, he can feed his family dinner. If you teach him to fish, he can feed his family for a lifetime.

Not only is the teaching of professionals more effective than stand-alone public relations, it's far less expensive. Training fees may range from as low as \$250 to \$500 per month. The larger the group of participants, the lower the investment per person. It has been determined that groups of five or six are optimal for personalized training, peer feedback and cross-pollination.

The character of the monthly marketing meeting varies with the number of participants, the type of practice, the skills of the participants, and their feelings about marketing. The approach is to educate participants about marketing opportunities, provide a menu of marketing activities and allow each participant to accept assignments in areas of interest. The trainer must be skilled in helping the participants implement the specific steps required to achieve goals.

One concept that is critical to success is the theory that all professionals must enjoy their marketing experiences or they will not pursue them. Therefore, an effective approach is to identify tasks that will not only be fruitful, but also fun and/or personally fulfilling.

The strategy for most firms to build their client base should begin by building on existing strengths. Since most firms rely on referrals, it makes sense to do things that stimulate existing relationships to refer more often.

People who like to write should write more. Those who enjoy public speaking should increase speaking engagements. In other words, the first step is to do more of what works. Once that's in place, the firm can implement other marketing activities, and identify new markets and the techniques to penetrate them.

Another part of learning marketing skills for professionals is understanding how to maximize the sales tools that they are already using. There are techniques to enhance the use of the telephone. There are techniques to enhance the use of correspondence. There are techniques to prepare verbal responses to maximize the likelihood of closing the deal.

The net results of an effective marketing education program is that professionals usually get bitten by the bug. They begin to find ways to incorporate marketing into their daily lives. Marketing becomes a part of the corporate culture. Everyone becomes part of the marketing team. Everyone participates in marketing activities and everyone benefits.