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A Marketing 'Coach' to Make It All Palatable

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The New Hope

For many lawyers, rainmaking looms as an unachievable skill. Limited time, limited contacts and limited awareness of opportunities make marketing frustrating. In addition, the thought of marketing brings up distasteful images of pushy salespeople, boring lunches and awkward networking. Even after interesting seminars, informative books and motivational tapes, the prospect of becoming a successful marketer still seems out of reach.

One reason many lawyers fail to learn how to market is they are too impatient. Marketing is a complex, demanding process. Seminars, books and tapes can provide instruction, but they rarely change behavior. Just like golf or tennis or any other difficult skill, marketing requires instruction, practice, failure and most important of all, persistence.

Another reason many lawyers fail in their marketing effort is that they are alone in their effort to seek new clients. Although many law firms preach the importance of marketing, they provide inadequate mentoring. If there is any mentoring at all, it is usually inconsistent and uses a role model approach in which the mentor says, "Do what I do" rather than, "Here are all the things that can be done." Of course it is unreasonable to expect that just because someone knows how to bring in clients, that they can teach that skill to others.

Lawyers are also alone in their marketing because many firms have a compensation policy that does not support team marketing. This creates competition among lawyers in the same firm instead of alliances. And, since the greatest producers often wield the most power, the system is difficult to change. This situation is usually exacerbated by rewarding only results rather than effort. Anything short of dollars in the door such as an article or speech could be perceived as non-productive time.

The reality of being alone in the marketing effort coupled with all of the demands of practicing law, building a personal life, and the misconceptions about what marketing requires, makes it easy to forget about marketing and go back to the comfort of the billable hour.

The new hope for non-marketers is the availability of a "Marketing Coach," who, like a golf or tennis pro, is available over a long period of time. A marketing coach provides guidance in small increments and motivates the lawyer to practice small steps in the real world. A marketing coach provides emotional support after inevitable failures, and acknowledgments after even small successes. A marketing coach helps the lawyer continue to be aware of marketing opportunities and stay focused on marketing activities. And, just as in sports, a marketing coach helps to change behavior and, over time, increase success.

Besides the similarity of a coach in the sports world, the concept of coaching is now prevalent in the corporate world. The 1996 November-December issue of the "Harvard Business Review" discusses in great detail the validity of coaching for executives. According to authors James Waldroop and Timothy Butler, "Coaching - helping to change the behaviors that threaten to derail a valued manager - is often the best way to help that manager succeed."

In the November, 1996 issue of "CFO Magazine," author Joseph McCafferty states, "For some executives . . . hiring a coach seems no more unusual than going to a personal trainer to help them stay fit, or a marriage counselor to help keep that relationship on track. Coaches have the ability to view things from afar . . . and to shed new light on difficult situations. Often they can act as a sounding board through tough decisions, help sharpen skills, and motivate."

Here are seven tips to make marketing coaching for lawyers effective:

1. Keep the coaching sessions brief. Lawyers will be more willing to take a meeting if they know that it will not interfere with an already busy schedule.

2. Do the coaching in individual and private sessions. Lawyers will be more likely to discuss their fears or discomfort about marketing if they are not concerned about being embarrassed in the presence of peers.

3. Help each lawyer identify achievable marketing goals. Instead of simply aiming for new business, an intermediate goal might be to write and publish an article. Another goal might be to get active in some organization. A third goal might be to pursue a few specific relationships. However, be careful to help the lawyers select goals which are in alignment with their unique personalities and interests.

Lawyers will be more inclined to pursue their goals if they seem fun and interesting.

4. Once marketing goals have been established, help lawyers decide specific action-items that will help them achieve their goals. For example, if a lawyer wants to write an article, the first step might be to identify a topic. They could also identify a publisher or an editor.

If their goal is to get active in organizations, they could begin by doing research into the various organizations that exist. They could call a handful of clients and find out what trade groups they support. And, if the goal is to pursue relationships, the first step might be in writing down a list of five or ten pre-existing relationships with some ideas on how to pursue them.

An essential aspect of effective coaching, is to break goals down into clear and manageable tasks that can easily be implemented. Another essential aspect is buy-in. The success of the coaching process will be increased if lawyers are encouraged to think of their own action-items. We have learned that when lawyers generate the idea, they are more highly motivated to accomplish it.

5. The action-items must be written down, and deadlines must be agreed upon. Ask each lawyer when they can absolutely commit to achieving a specific task and have them put it in their calendar. Deadlines are critical to insure follow-through.

6. Follow-up with each lawyer on a regular basis to make sure they are meeting their deadlines. Without follow-up and accountability, the coaching process will fail. Lawyers tend to put off doing their assignments and go back to old habits.

7. Finally, as lawyers implement marketing assignments, even the smallest successes need to be acknowledged and reinforced. A telephone call to a client, an outline for an article - accomplishing small steps are just as important as the ultimate goal of bringing new business in the door. In fact, it is the constant implementation of small steps which ultimately results in new business.

As a result of coaching, we have found that non-marketing lawyers can overcome their distaste for marketing. With consistent reinforcement, lawyers can change their behavior and learn to incorporate marketing activities into their daily routine. Over time, they will become more aware of the marketing opportunities available to them, and develop new skills which will serve them for their entire careers.

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