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Got 15 Minutes? He'll Make You A Marketer!

"Telephone Coach" Uses Personal Touch To Win A Loyal Legal Following

By Michael M. Bowden



Every two weeks or so, Phoenix solo Mike Mizel shuts his office door and spends 15 minutes on the telephone, receiving intense coaching on his firm's marketing efforts. He hangs up with a notepad full of expert feedback on those efforts and a precise set of instructions on what to do next. For the past dozen years, Mizel has worked with Kohn Communications, the brainchild of two brothers – Larry and Bob Kohn – whose company caters to lawyers who can't stand marketing.

"They bring a firm-specific focus to the process of what should be done to bring in more business," Mizel explained. "I've generally come to the table with an amorphous idea – 'I need better clients in this area' – and they help me turn it into a custom-tailored process that really makes it happen."

The Los Angeles-based coaching service caters to skeptics. Newcomers reluctant to dive in will find a free book on the company's website, along with a free audio seminar, a pile of articles from legal journals around the country, and a money-back guarantee for any lawyer who uses the company's services and isn't satisfied.

"We focus on the lawyer who is angry that there is a need for marketing; someone who says, 'I didn't go to law school to go into sales,' or who feels, 'This is beneath me,'" said Larry Kohn.

"Our typical client is the recalcitrant non marketer," said company President Larry Kohn. "We focus on the lawyer who is angry that there is a need for marketing; someone who says, 'I didn't go to law school to go into sales,' or who feels, 'This is beneath me!'"

Part marketing coach, part motivational speaker, part pushy mother hen, Kohn's job is to get to know individual lawyers – their personal style, their firm culture, their particular hang-ups and reservations about selling, their specific marketing needs – and then custom-design sales plans that work for them.

"Every single lawyer has the skills to become an effective rainmaker," Kohn believes. "The key is to help them develop a strategy that they're comfortable with and proud of, so that every single morning they're excited to market, rather than thinking, 'Oh no, I have to do that selling stuff again today.'"

The secret to accomplishing that, Kohn said, is to make marketing an organic part of the lawyer's personality and practice, rather than a foreign and distasteful necessity. Some attorneys call Kohn with a single, specific marketing problem; he offers some guidance and

advice, and the relationship ends.

But many lawyers have been loyal clients for a decade or more – telephone-conferencing with Kohn every month or two to hash out new marketing challenges as they arise, usually within the context of an overarching, long-term marketing plan.

These attorneys use their sessions with Kohn for direction, positive reinforcement and periodic course correction.

"What keeps me coming back is the personalized direction, tailored to the specific needs and clientele of our firm, and the different personalities of our lawyers," said Gary Barr, a partner in a five-lawyer firm in Encino, California. "Larry provides both ideas and accountability – it's easy to say you're going to market, but it's invaluable to have someone to answer to for it, and to ensure that your plans and intentions get carried through."

Kohn's other clients express similar sentiments.

"Many lawyers like being coached," said Kohn. "Look, I don't care how good you are – even Tiger Woods has a coach!"



Kohn's client list reveals a surprising mix of attorney types, ranging from solo GP's in the rural Midwest on up to partners in prestigious Manhattan megafirms.

"I have clients who are generating in the tens of millions of dollars, who still sit down for our telephone session religiously every month," he said. "Because it's my job to take them to the next level, to challenge their strategy, to help them rethink their assumptions about marketing possibilities. As I see it, I'm not doing my job if I'm not constantly pushing you to higher limits."

Why Lawyers Hate Marketing

Kohn said it's difficult to generalize about his coaching work, because no two legal marketing problems are exactly alike – they vary based on a specific lawyer's personality traits, elements of his or her law firm culture, and sometimes the wider legal culture of a given jurisdiction. But there are some common threads.

"Most of these lawyers have a deep anti marketing attitude," Kohn said. "It starts at a very young age: Somewhere along the way, you get it in your head that you're not a salesperson. And from that point, all of the things that you negatively associate with sales – puffery in advertising, the 'used car salesman' personality, the telemarketers who bother you during dinner – reinforce your position that *you* are not one of *them*; that you are not 'a marketer.'"

According to Kohn, attorneys are especially prone to these thought processes.

"Lawyers are, by nature and training, much more advanced at reinforcing these assumptions than are most other people – once they get a position, it's their job to justify and defend that position, and they're really good at it," he said.

"Not only are these lawyers not open to marketing; they're downright hostile towards it," he said. "And that's ridiculous. Marketing in and of itself is not negative or positive – it's nothing! It's value-neutral! It's how you do it that matters."

Beyond a general hostility toward marketing, there are several other common problems that can hamstring an attorney's ability to market. Among these are social shyness, lack of focus on a target audience, a failure to define what makes his or her firm unique, and problems imposed on the lawyer from outside – for example, an associate who's having trouble building a client base, because prospects say the fees his firm compels him to charge are too high.

Kohn's solutions commonly involve the creation of contact databases,

prioritizing and segmenting your potential market, planning approaches to prospects, old and new, learning to give value in advance – defining what you can offer a client that other lawyers can't.

"I start where they tell me they have problems," said Kohn. "I don't just go off on my own pre-conceived agenda. That's the value of the one-on-one sessions over a book or a marketing seminar, which is necessarily general and generic. I focus exclusively on the individual I'm talking to, and I apply marketing solutions to their specific situation." He added, "In the final analysis, you can't motivate people to do something they're ashamed of, or that they really don't believe in. That's where we begin, and that's always our guiding philosophy."

Longtime Clients

Barr said his five-lawyer firm's initial marketing problem was an old-school aversion to marketing as something below the dignity of the firm.

"The goal was to get the holdouts involved in marketing, as opposed to just one or two people," said Barr, who has been working with Kohn for 10 years.

It worked so well that, today, every member of the firm engages in separate coaching sessions with Kohn, at straddled intervals of two months each. He said they use Kohn's coaching sessions to apply good marketing ideas to the specific needs of their firm.

"When one of us hear of a new marketing idea, we'll oftentimes talk to Larry about the pros and cons of the concept as applied to our business needs," he said. "In addition to generating ideas, he is also an excellent sounding board for other peoples' ideas."

A few years ago, Barr even invited Kohn to join the marketing portion of a firm retreat – a move that resulted in the creation of an innovative and successful firm Web page.

"He showed us how to turn it into an active marketing tool rather than a static advertising tool," Barr said. "Several members of the firm were concerned about the cost versus the benefit of a firm Web site, and he convinced them that there was a valid purpose behind spending the money."

Bob Schlesinger, half of a two-lawyer family law boutique in St. Paul, Minnesota, decided to call Kohn after hearing him speak at a bar meeting about five years ago – they now do a coaching session about once a month.

"Over the years, Larry and I have talked about any number of different marketing approaches for my firm,"

Schlesinger said. "In each session, we talk about the progress we've made, and brainstorm about what can be done to improve their effectiveness. And when I procrastinate, he holds my feet to the fire, in a very appropriate way."

After 30 years in practice, Schlesinger said he had an "old-fashioned" reluctance to market, but that Kohn changed his mind over time with a combination of logical cajoling and good ideas. One recent success came when Kohn helped Schlesinger, a gifted public speaker, design and launch a series of seminars he'll be delivering to local community groups.

"Larry has really practical advice on how to make it rain," he said. "And he frames that advice within my standards of what kinds of legal marketing are appropriate and dignified and which are not. That's why I keep going back."

"There are definitely lawyers in my office who think marketing turns law practice into a dog-and-pony show," added Shell Capeloto, a small-firm lawyer in Pasadena, California, who has been meeting with Kohn every six weeks for two years.

He keeps going back for an "ongoing dialogue" on marketing, as various members of the firm come up with new ideas or reject existing approaches.

"I like working with Larry because he has a lot of good ideas – but also because he really listens and has come to intimately understand the marketing dynamics within our firm," Capeloto said.

"He'll say something like, 'Six months ago you were talking about a similar idea; how did that work out?' or 'Wasn't so-and-so reluctant to try this approach last time we spoke? What's his opinion now?' He is very specific, and he holds us to our ideas and promises."

The firm charges in half-hour increments. The coaching time is 15 minutes and the balance of the time is dedicated to review and planning before and after each conversation. According to Kohn, "The clients like the limited time commitment."

The frequency is up to the lawyer. "Sometimes I'll need to speak with Larry every couple of weeks; and sometimes a couple of months will go by without a session," Capeloto said. "It all depends on my needs and my schedule."

Accountability Is Key

Kohn established Kohn Communications in 1985. He began by providing brochures, newsletters, client satisfaction surveys and public relations. But coaching became his signature.

“The average lawyer we work with is already making a very handsome living. But it is not unusual for them to do double, triple or quadruple their book of business over the course of a few years of coaching,” said Larry Kohn.

His coaching sessions began when a good client left a big firm to open a solo practice, and told Kohn she could no longer afford to pay a PR company. Kohn offered to meet with her in person for an hour a month instead, coaching her to do marketing on her own.

Other local coaching clients followed, until one L.A. lawyer had to move to Dayton, and asked whether they could continue to work together by phone. They tried it; it worked; and a new approach to lawyer marketing was born. And it spread nationwide, Kohn said, because very few marketing firms do what his company does.

“Most local marketing firms don’t do coaching; they do what I call ‘sanitary marketing’ – helping the law firm design a new brochure, or logo or Web site, helping them with their ‘branding.’ In other words, spending a lot of money and time talking about marketing strategy, instead of teaching the lawyer how to actually do it.”

While Kohn’s firm does produce brochures, newsletters, Web sites, and other marketing products, he says the telephone coaching is an entirely different category of his business.

“It’s a very specific task to get a lawyer who doesn’t want to market to first feel comfortable with the process and then to excel at it,” he said. “What makes this program work is the accountability: Every month we talk. Every month we come back to the table. Every month the lawyer has to answer to me. That monthly interaction, more than anything else, forces the issue.”

Kohn ritualizes the meetings by being a stickler for precision: When he arranges a coaching session at 1:30 p.m., that’s exactly when it happens — not at 1:25 or 1:35.

“If we arrange a session at 1:30, you can pick up the phone at precisely 1:30 and say, ‘Hi Larry,’ because I’ll be on the other end,” he said, adding that he keeps two atomic clocks in his office so that his clients can never claim his watch was wrong.

“That doesn’t mean I’m insane,” he said, with a laugh. “The reason I stress timing so heavily is to force my clients to see our sessions as a serious commitment. Remember, these are lawyers who aren’t in love with marketing – and so anything I can do to make a big deal about the fact that I’m calling enhances the likelihood that they’ll be there at the appointed time to take the call.”

When lawyers aren’t able to take the call, they get charged for the appointment anyway unless they’ve notified Kohn in

advance of the time conflict.

“I’ll be reasonable in the early stages, if they didn’t remember or whatever,” he said. “But ultimately, if lawyers don’t take our sessions seriously and call me with a couple of days’ notice if they’re not going to be there, then they’re not good clients, and we’re wasting each other’s time.”

Skeptics Welcome

Is telephone coaching really effective? Kohn is nothing if not confident.

The Five Most Common Legal Marketing Mistakes

By Michael M. Bowden

Hours spent on effective marketing are every bit as vital to the long-term health of a law firm as the billable hours lawyers watch to gauge their success, according to Larry Kohn of Kohn Communications, a marketing and management consulting firm in Los Angeles.

Are your marketing efforts as effective as they could be? Here, Kohn discusses the five marketing mistakes most frequently made by lawyers:

1. Lawyers misdefine client relations as marketing.

“This is the top one. If you’ve got somebody who’s referring good business to you, and you like the work they’re doing, you’ve got to maintain that relationship. But don’t invest so much time in existing clients that you neglect cultivating and reaching out to new clients.

“I agree that it is important to have client relations, and, yes, that is your first line of attack. But ask yourself: ‘If I’m taking this person out to lunch three times a year because he’s my good client, could I take him out one time a year to maintain the relationship, and dedicate those other two lunches to somebody new?’”

2. Lawyers fail to structure their marketing.

“Lawyers will often say, ‘Yeah, I’ve really got to call that person.’ But they don’t take it to the next step and say, ‘And here’s when I’m going to call, and here’s what I’m going to say.’

“If you’re a lawyer with a court date or a filing deadline, you physically calendar those items, and when the time comes, you perform them. But the vast majority of lawyers I work with, when we first meet, aren’t using a calendar to

“What you learn is going to change your life – and not in small ways,” he said. “The average lawyer we work with is already making a very handsome living. But it is not unusual for them to double, triple or quadruple their book of business over the course of a few years of coaching.”

That’s a very big promise – and Kohn offers a money-back guarantee and a Web site full of free marketing information to convince potential clients that he can deliver. The attorneys interviewed for this article declined to discuss specific figures for their individual practices, but did affirm that Kohn’s claims are not an exaggeration.

As for skeptics who suspect he’s all hat and no cattle, Kohn invites them to put him to the test: His Web site offers a free, 30-minute audio seminar on legal marketing so you can hear him doing his thing before you call. Other free premiums include a host of downloadable forms to use in planning and organizing your marketing efforts.

Want to learn more? Kohn’s written a book on the subject, *Selling With Honor: Strategies For Selling Without Selling Your Soul* that sounds a lot like Kohn himself – funny and relaxed, while also serious and to-the-point. Think he’s just trying to peddle books? Fine: Download a free copy in PDF format.

While you’re at it, check out the archive of Kohn’s other marketing articles, penned for a laundry list of legal and marketing publications across the country, with titles like: “12 Tips for Making Your Seminars a Superior Marketing Machine,” “Developing a Marketing Culture in Your Firm,” and “Associates Can Make Rain Too.”

Kohn’s Web site also offers a page full of testimonials from lawyers around the country, and a promise to send more upon request.

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structure their marketing. Instead they think, ‘I’ll do it when I have the time,’ and, of course, as any lawyer knows, you never have the time.

“I’ll go even further, and tell you this: If you’re so starved for work that you actually have time available for marketing, then you’re in big trouble! You’ve got to get good at blending marketing into a busy day – and planting seeds long before you need the business.”

3. Lawyers do marketing they don’t like.

“A lot of lawyers think that marketing consists of various activities that they don’t want to do. For instance, a lawyer may read an article and come to the conclusion that good legal marketing means that they must arrange some public speaking. But if that lawyer is scared of death of giving a speech, you know what? That speech is never going to happen. There will always be something more important to do.

“But if this lawyer also loves tennis, why should he or she waste time torturing themselves about giving speeches? Instead they should concentrate on the issue of blending their interests with their marketing. I once had a client – a litigator who got most of her cases as referrals from other lawyers.

“As we spoke, I learned that she didn’t have time to market, but did spend hours practicing the harp. We worked from there and she now is the head of a monthly group meeting of lawyers who are also musicians. They get together to play, and they have a ball! And when those lawyers need a litigator, guess who gets the referral?”

4. Lawyers are weak on marketing follow-through.

“Lawyers are sometimes good at the first client meeting, but not at the 10th meeting. A lawyer will tell me, ‘Well, I took that guy out to lunch and I told him what I did, but he never called! What else can I do?’

“Maybe that referral source won’t be ready to send you a case for five years. But when he finally has that perfect case, and you haven’t been in touch for five years, what are the chances that he’s going to remember that lunch? None! It was worthless. You’ve got to maintain a presence, motivate the person to feel comfortable and confident about the relationship, and build an alliance.

“One of the most important things to realize is that the sales cycle in the legal business can be very long – especially if you’re dealing with someone who already has a lawyer.

“In the meantime, every time you meet a client, negotiate your follow-through at the moment of that meeting. Don’t sit there and think, ‘I’ve really got to call that guy in a couple of months.’ Come out and say, ‘I really enjoyed this lunch. We should get together again and talk some more about this topic.’ And plan a tentative follow-up date, then and there. Because if you don’t follow through, then you may as well not bother with the initial meeting.”

5. Lawyers confuse planning with marketing.

“There is an undeniable correlation between action and results: Lawyers who talk about marketing and read about it and plan it and attend CLEs and seminars on it, but who never actually pick up the phone and schedule a lunch are playing games with themselves. They’re wasting their time.

“You’ve got to spend less time thinking about marketing, and more time doing it. This may sound like overly simple advice, but it addresses a problem that is absolutely prevalent in legal marketing.”