

Marketing your firm — where do you start?

By Gary Mitchell; Managing Director, GEM Communications Inc.

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The legal industry is more competitive than ever. Competition for clients and competition for talent is an increasingly challenging prospect in most markets across Canada. So what can your firm do to set itself apart? Here we look at a couple of challenges law firms face when marketing themselves, along with a couple of proven solutions.

Challenge:

The industry is very competitive. So how does one law firm differentiate itself from the next?

Opportunity/solution:

Start with a clear understanding of who you are. According to Heather Gray-Grant, director of marketing & business development at a Vancouver firm, and past president of the Legal Marketing Association, less than half of the law firms in North America have a business plan.

“Unlike most businesses, law firm hierarchy structures are relatively flat”, she explains, “So your sales force is comprised of every single lawyer in your firm. In the absence of a plan clarifying who you are and where you’re going, each lawyer will sing from their own song sheet.”

Step one – create a plan; call it a strategic plan, business plan or marketing plan – just as long as you get one down on paper. Then, once everyone is on-side with the firm’s key messages, focus on marketing your individual lawyers and practice groups; or rather train your lawyers how to market themselves. Help them to create a plan for their individual practices, one that is aligned with the firm plan. Each one of your lawyers has a distinct and unique combination of education, training, approach, expertise, personality and ability. That is what really sets your firm apart, because that is what sets each one of your

lawyers apart from their competition. Your firm creates a relationship with your target audience, and your lawyers create the relationships with individual people. Client development starts with your lawyers. So give them the tools they require in order to build relationships and attract more business.

Challenge:

You understand the need to make changes in the way you market your firm; how do you move these ideas forward within your firm? How do you get buy-in from the senior and managing partners to enact the changes you need to make? Some of the senior lawyers at these firms are very comfortable. They are used to managing the firm the way they always have. The problem is that when these lawyers were building their careers and practices, the market was very different — it wasn’t so competitive, and it was easier to attract new business simply by way of reputation. That has all changed.

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Heather Gray-Grant



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Opportunity/solution:

I see two approaches. The first is to strategically find practice groups and lawyers that are onside with your marketing objectives. Create small pilot programs. Once you have achieved success, slowly expand these programs. Then go to the managing partner or committee with the results and a plan to expand them even further.

“Lawyers need evidence in order to build trust”, says Gray- Grant. “They deal in concepts and probable outcomes when advising clients on legal issues because they appreciate the variables in a legal situation; but they require a greater sense of predictability when running their business. Show them that your plan works on a smaller scale, and they’ll be willing to risk it on a larger scale.”

The second point to consider is that these senior partners will not be there forever and then they do decide to retire, who is going to replace them? Who is going to buy them out? If that isn’t already clear within your firm, there is another opportunity to get buy-in. If there isn’t an obvious next generation of leadership waiting in the wings, the partners will be more open to changes in order to create that next generation — in other words, to find and groom the lawyers that will take their place and buy them out.

You have shown them the “need” and you have provided them with a proven solution. There are plenty of resources out there. In fact Vancouver could well be ahead of the curve having started the first ever international chapter of The Legal Marketing Association — www.lmavancouver.com and, in its first year, Vancouver won chapter of the year.

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