



Debra L. Rhodunda

Fundamentals of Practice Group Marketing Plans

By Debra L. Rhodunda

How much do you and your partners focus on marketing your practice group? Too little, if you are a typical practice group, yet marketing your group's expertise is central to differentiating it from others and getting the word out to current and potential clients.

Institutional law firm marketing helps to some degree, but individual practice groups get work differently. The message and medium need to be tailored because different types of clients have distinctive needs and available resources — and different practice groups have different service methodologies. This is why the development of a unique practice group marketing plan is important.

Although unique in terms of specific plan details, all practice group marketing plans have the same fundamental objectives of 1) retaining and increasing work from profitable clients, and 2) attracting more profitable clients.

Ideally, the group's marketing goal is to position itself as one of the top three firms in its market niche so it easily makes the short list of various in-house counsel. Research by McKinsey & Company shows that "the top three firms in each market niche will get the opportunity to sell 70 percent of the time while the opportunity for the fourth place firm drops below 40 percent."

As you begin to work on your group's marketing plan, consider the tips that have worked for many.

Ask Questions

Find out what clients are saying. Why do clients choose you? Are clients satisfied? How do clients describe the group to others? What are clients looking for in counsel? Not sure? Ask your clients. The answers will provide a good foundation of information, most of which will identify opportunities to expand market share.

Practice groups have a few methods available to them to get the answers to these questions.

Written surveys and personal interviews are the most common.

Written Surveys

Client surveys provide a number of benefits and in particular help practice group members plan for the future. Responses from a number of clients are tallied, and the final product provides an overall direction for the group in such areas as level of satisfaction, service offerings, and the like. The marketplace offers several off-the-shelf survey software packages and there are organizations that strictly provide tabulation services. The value of a survey is not just in collecting the data, however, but in interpreting its findings and then using it effectively in your group's plan development. Without such analysis, a client survey's potential is limited. Practice groups have had mixed results with conducting surveys on their own. Most have found consultants with knowledge of the legal market are in a better position to guide the group — not only to ensure the right questions are asked, but also to maximize opportunities revealed by the survey's findings.

Personal Interviews

Personal interviews go beyond a standardized survey and allow interviewers the ability to probe for supporting information. Best practices indicate that the primary lawyer contact should not conduct interviews with his or her own client, as the interviewee may be less than candid. Most practice groups have found that a third-party interviewer generates more fruitful results. Firms have found success with outside consultants, or internally, with practice group leaders, managing partners, marketing directors — and in some instances executive directors — conducting the interviews and reporting back to the primary relationship lawyer. Interviewing four to five key clients per year is a good start.

“... individual practice groups get work differently. The message and medium need to be tailored ...”

Understand the Whole Picture

Group members need to spend time analyzing the group’s situation both internally and externally. The internal analysis requires the group to ask itself a few defining questions such as: 1) Where is the group going and what should it be in three years? 2) What are the group’s past and current marketing initiatives? And 3) what worked, what didn’t, and why? An external analysis is just as crucial to the planning process. It forces your practice group to paint a realistic picture of the external marketing environment. Part of the group’s focus should be to find out

helps group members understand why certain marketing decisions receive a higher priority than others.

Expand Opportunities

A well-rounded marketing plan develops strategies for potential clients, current clients and former clients. Lawyers tend to focus on bringing new clients in the door, but a thorough marketing plan helps find opportunities for all types.

Current Clients

Marketing should not focus solely on attracting new clients, but also should include marketing initiatives

communicating with them. If they liked their past treatment and respect your group as a whole, they may give you more work or recommend your group to a colleague.

Altman Weil conducts client surveys on behalf of law firms. Survey results over the years indicate that if clients have not referred a particular law firm it is often because they were never asked to do so. Although lawyers dislike directly asking for additional work, clients are typically not bothered — but may not think of making a referral unless asked to do so.

Asking for additional work or a referral should not be restricted to past clients. Most practice group members find success asking for new business from current clients as well. The rub is that the majority of lawyers find it difficult to ask. Lawyers tend to need training in this area and we often suggest a sales training program be built into the practice group plan as part of the firm’s ongoing professional development efforts.

Potential Clients

Practice groups that develop a profile of potential clients and then build marketing initiatives focused on that profile are more successful in attracting new business. A good first step for group members is to discuss and define how and why prospective clients “buy” the group’s legal services and, perhaps to an equal extent, discuss why prospective clients are *not* buying the group’s services.

Provide Appropriate Resources

A great plan often loses momentum without the right support. For most lawyers, the right marketing materials or use of a marketing database is critical. As the group plans its marketing strategies, be realistic about what group members will need to implement the plan. For firms with in-house marketing departments, find out what resources

continued on page 10

“A lot of practice groups forget to focus on current clients; ... 80% of your practice group’s new business will come from 20% of your present clients.”

about market potential, competition, industry trends, and the like.

This sounds more like strategic planning rather than marketing, right? You are correct. However, a bit of planning is needed in order to effectively market practice groups. Groups that jump right into marketing plan development have a more difficult time because there are no fundamental facts upon which to base decisions. For those groups that invest the time up front, marketing decisions come more naturally.

If the group is small enough, invite all group members to participate in this part of the process. In larger groups, invite a cross section of new and more mature lawyers to represent the group. Involving many members of the group in these conversations not only balances discussions, but also helps build interest and “buy in” for the marketing process. It also

to enhance relationships with current clients. A lot of practice groups forget to focus on current clients; however, those that do invest the time and effort often find success. Recall the Pareto Principle (a.k.a., the 80:20 rule) where 80% of your practice group’s new business will come from 20% of your present clients. Work the principle to your advantage — current clients typically consume less time and marketing expenditures since an awareness of and relationship with the group already exists.

Former Clients

Don’t neglect former clients. Periodically “check in” with them, especially since satisfied clients are typically proponents of the firm. Do not be concerned that clients will be offended, as they typically understand why your practice group is

Fundamentals ... continued from page 9

are available to the group and tap into those. For those without in-house support, a discussion with other practice group leaders or other lawyers interested in marketing may reveal available marketing resources already in use within the firm. If not, seek outside assistance to determine appropriate resources such as communication materials (e.g., website, brochure, newsletters, etc.), media opportunities and the like.

Implementation and Evaluation

Your group developed a marketing plan — now what? You need to set the plan in motion or it will begin to collect dust. Accountability is the key. Practice groups that assign tasks, responsible parties, deadlines, and of course, budgets, are more successful than groups that do not.

Part of successful accountability is monitoring. Practice groups that continually monitor the status of ongoing tasks and initiatives are

more likely to succeed than those that do not. Monitoring ensures that practice group members devote the requisite time to specific marketing initiatives and don't just revert back to client work. This type of peer pressure often provides the necessary incentive to accomplish tasks, especially since group members would rather not disappoint each other. At a minimum, it keeps the ball rolling.

Remember that practice group marketing planning is not a one-time process. Periodic evaluation of what is working and what is not paying off allows the group to fine-tune its plan. Successful plans are often adjusted to meet the changing legal needs of the group and adaptation to the ever-changing legal landscape.

Benefits of Practice Group Marketing Planning

Evidence shows that planning produces results. Benefits are many as the plan is put into motion and periodically enhanced:

- Practice group marketing and strategic planning makes it easier to define and identify target markets.
- Planning focuses and improves marketing efforts. The group as a whole may be performing a variety of marketing initiatives, but it may be overly invested in some areas while neglecting other prime opportunities. A clearly defined focus helps balance the group's efforts, which tend to increase new business development potential through more targeted efforts.
- The process helps improve client service and enhances client relationships and cross-selling potential.
- Practice group planning contributes to the firm's overall well-being by increasing name recognition and awareness of the firm's specialties.

A practice group's readiness for marketing planning can be measured by its willingness to spend the time and resources for implementation, and its positive attitude about planning and marketing. Where does your practice group stand? ♦

Debra L. Rhodunda is a consultant with Altman Weil, Inc. working out of the firm's offices in Newtown Square, PA. She can be reached at (610) 886-2000 or dlrhodunda@altmanweil.com.



Report to
Legal Management

published by:

Altman Weil Publications, Inc.

Two Campus Boulevard, Suite 200
Newtown Square, PA 19073
Telephone (610) 886-2000
FAX (610) 359-0467

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

Authorization to photocopy items for the internal or personal use of the subscriber or its internal or personal use of specific individuals in the subscriber's organization is granted by Altman Weil Publications, Inc. provided that the source and Altman Weil Publications, Inc. copyright is noted on the reproduction and the fee of \$1.00 per page is paid to Altman Weil Publications, Inc., Two Campus Boulevard, Suite 200, Newtown Square, PA 19073. Copying for purposes other than internal or personal reference requires the express permission of Altman Weil Publications, Inc. For permission, contact Altman Weil at the above address. Copyright © 2003 by Altman Weil Publications, Inc.