

A marketing plan fit for a law firm with a modern outlook and traditional values.

This paper has been written for successful law firm leaders who don't need to employ a marketing director, but who would like their firm's marketing to be less haphazard and more joined up.

Managing Partners and Senior Partners in law firms care passionately about client service and the image of their firm in the community in which it operates. The typical firm I am thinking of is maybe long-established, and the partners and staff both live and work in the area where the firm has its office(s).

Supporting the outward-facing image of the firm is its marketing plan. Often, the plan resembles a number of ad hoc disparate activities, brought together in a document reflecting the personal and departmental preferences of the fee earners. There might be an employed Marketing Co-ordinator, whose task it is to manage and deliver the activities. This person may be frustrated as fee earners who were keen on an idea at inception become 'too busy' to support the 'nuts and bolts' implementation.

What I describe above is a bottom-up approach to law firm marketing. It is unfocussed, tactical, has no overall purpose and is probably not untypical! Such a marketing approach is unlikely to contribute to enhancing the image of the firm. In this paper, I recommend a different structure to marketing; one that is perfect for a heritage legal brand. A firm with a mix of private client and commercial work, and whose aim is to be seen as having a modern outlook with traditional values.

Budget and investment

Adopt (and believe) the mantra that marketing is an investment in the firm, not a cost. Like all investments, know how much money you have available. A rule of thumb is a budget of 2% of annual fee income, which includes marketing staff costs, fee earners own marketing e.g. lunches, but excludes staff events. As part of financial planning, ask departments to put a short proposal together about what marketing they want to do next year and how much they think it will cost. This is a good discipline and gets teams invested.

Plan the year ahead

Know your firm's marketing calendar for the year ahead. Items like the annual golf day, seminars, The Legal 500 and Christmas Party can all be scheduled. Understand how much time is needed to deliver these activities and don't schedule other things too close to them. It sounds simple, but the Marketing Co-ordinator needs strength and support when a determined fee earner wants their summer event on a certain day! Communicate the marketing calendar regularly to all staff.

Who do you want to talk to and what do you want to say?

If you follow this advice, your marketing should be pretty good most of the time. Ask yourself and the management team: What do you want marketing to achieve for this firm? It's OK to say, 'we've been around for 100 years and we want to be here in a century's time'. The marketing plan can reinforce everything about those positive reputational attributes of the firm.

A broad-based approach

Don't bother looking, there's no magic bullet to transform your marketing performance overnight. The profile of the law firm I am thinking about is likely to need a broad-based marketing plan with activities to support:

- The firm and its brand;
- Its offices; and
- Its departments and market sectors.

Get to know the influencers in your area

The value in knowing the Editor of the local paper, the Chief Executive of the Chamber of Commerce, the Publisher of the town's free local magazine is significant. Even a lunch, twice a year, means the channels of communication are open if you need them. If meeting the media is something you're uncomfortable with, find a local PR person first who can help and possibly accompany you. I guarantee there will be mutual value in relationships like these.

Own something

Effective marketing is about repetition and reinforcement. If you own something, like a monthly event, you become known for that. For example, a lunch club, that's always well-attended by other professionals in the town is a really good way to achieve this.

Understand how advertising works

One off advertising is a waste of money. If you decide that your firm is going to advertise its services, then make a year-long commitment to one advertiser. The year-long campaign will provide consistency and repetition, the two elements of successful advertising. A communications professional will advise how you can promote different services within a consistent campaign. Don't worry too much about measurement, as most people will sub-consciously filter out the advert as they don't need a solicitor at this time. There will however be some subliminal reinforcement. Other media will see you advertise, and their sales executives will be on the phone. But you can play a straight bat, and explain you've taken a decision, right in your view to invest in a consistent campaign with the leading publication in your area.

Beware of the pitfalls of sponsorship

You will doubtless have been approached by the local cricket/football club about a sponsorship deal including your firm's name on their kit, links to your website, mentions in newsletters and social media etc. You can either decide to become involved purely for altruistic reasons (and that's fine). But if you are hoping for some return, then choose a club where people from the firm are already engaging i.e. coaching, committee member etc. Too many times sponsorship deals are struck where the firm is not 'invested' and there ends up being disappointment all round when there are no tangible returns.

Networking and junior members of staff

Invest time and energy in developing the networking skills of your junior members of staff. Consider how the networking experience of seasoned fee earners can be passed on. Rather than sending a newly qualified or a trainee solicitor to the next Chamber event, have them be accompanied by someone who they can learn from. Junior fee earners want to network but say they don't know how to.

Social media

Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook are additional communication channels alongside more traditional methods. They are here to stay, so its sensible to make use of them. If you haven't got one, get a social media usage policy for your firm. Know who will be using the social media platforms on behalf of the firm. Understand the levels of permissions so people have the access appropriate for the role you want them to perform. Encourage those who want to, to get involved by sharing the content that is centrally generated. Finally, be realistic about what you want your social media activity to achieve.

Website and Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)

Consider engaging an SEO expert for your firm's website. 40% of SEO is about the web page, how it is written, the description of the images, the page title and the page description. 60% is about back links which is a real SEO specific skill. The internet is a competitive area for law firms and it is getting ever-harder to achieve Page 1 organic rankings without the specialist work around back linking.

Don't be afraid of new ideas

Good law firm leaders are those who appreciate the value of new and fresh ideas, even if they might not fully understand them. People in their mid-thirties are reaching senior positions in business. They have grown up in the computer age and are comfortable with a virtual network of contacts, the same way as someone twenty years older is with a 'boys network'. That's why marketing tools such as Pay-Per-Click advertising, and Facebook business advertising provide genuine opportunities for firms to find new business opportunities. These tools allow for forensic targeting of audience types, control over advertising spend and reports to measure advertising effectiveness. A law firm with a modern outlook would be missing a trick not making itself aware of these opportunities.



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