

Legal Marketing When Funds Are Tight

Ok, the economy stinks and, as a result, law firms are asking tough questions about marketing. Some firms, in a cost-control panic, toss every dime they can lay hands on into the equity pool, figuring that, if they can just keep per partner profits marginally higher, their best people won't rush for the exits. Their question about marketing: *Should we be spending money on it at all?*

Elsewhere, cooler heads are also taking a sharp look at marketing budgets but with a different slant. They've seen waste over the years and instances when time and cash outlays did not generate visible returns. But these firms know that, no matter how bad the market, you have to give something to get something. Their question about marketing is very different: *How should we be spending money to maximize our bang for the buck?*

It's a question that demands three essential steps. First, eliminate inessential activities that waste precious dollars. Second, invest more time and money in the marketing initiatives that do provide good return on investment. Third, and very important, take very practical, very specific steps that ensure full benefit from these tried-and-true activities.

Most firms will continue to have Web sites, do e-mail blasts, send their lawyers to conferences, etc. - so why not leverage these ongoing tools for maximum return, especially in a marketplace as resource-challenged as today's?

Among these standard activities, none provides a better practicum for such leveraging than the presentations and speeches your lawyers deliver at professional conferences, client-sponsored programs, and your own firm-sponsored seminars. Too often their participation is a one-off with none of the preparation or follow-up necessary to generate business. Conversely, mastery of the best "event marketing" practices will carry over into other marketing areas as well, helping to create a real marketing culture in the process.

There are two dimensions to every presentation: the material being presented and the business reason for presenting it. The latter deserves at least as much preparation as the actual content of the speech or panel discussion; in fact, more so, as the marketing impact depends on many careful logistics. Among those logistics:

Send invitations on your own letterhead/e-mail even if one has been separately sent by your firm. Doing so can boost attendance as colleagues and prospects who might not attend an institutional event may want to attend one they identify with you. From a marketing standpoint, it's also a reminder of your expertise on the presentation topic.

Your firm should arrange to contact all sign-ups with a reminder a week ahead of the event. Call your own contacts a week before as well.

Circulate an internal note urging others at your firm to attend the presentation, wherever it is happening. Marketing staffers should attend as well, as that can only help them promote and follow up on the event.

Obtain the most up-to-date attendee list and assign each attending attorney and professional support person from your firm a group of "must get-to-knows."

Encourage attorneys from other practice areas to send invites to their clients. The presentation may be valuable for those clients too, or they can pass the information on to others in their company or organization.

Think of the temporal and spatial dimensions of the event in military terms. To maximize the long-term marketing impact, your own people need to be in the right place at the right time, and you need to engage the "other side" - those with whom you want to develop relationships - as strategically as possible. To these ends:

There should be at least one attorney from your firm at each table, if at all possible, so that every audience member can be potentially engaged.

To avoid redundancy, no more than two attorneys from your firm should sit at the same table.

Introduce your colleagues before, after, or, if appropriate, during the presentation itself. The goal is to mine for cross-selling possibilities. You may find a pretext for introducing them in your speech. For example, "This whole related area of sick building litigation is also important...my colleague, Don Jones who's here today, specializes in these cases...Don, please identify yourself in case anyone in the audience has a question for you after the presentation...."

During the presentation or panel discussion, be on the lookout for opportunities to mention one or two relevant successes you and your colleagues have had. Do so, of course, in proper context, without being obviously self-promotional.

Any subject matter-related pretext for future contact is worth pursuing. For example, refer once or twice to an event, opinion, new legislation, etc., and say, "if you want more information on this, leave me your card."

Or consider distributing a simple survey on a substantive matter and promise to send the results to the attendees.

Make sure you ask the prospects you meet if it will be okay to contact them in the near future. It's called "permission marketing."

All these preparations and tactical maneuverings are for naught unless you follow up, follow up, and follow up some more. In particular:

All contact information from the cards you've collected should be entered into your CRM or other contact database.

Find pretexts for direct phone calls, including lunch invitations to those event attendees in your area.

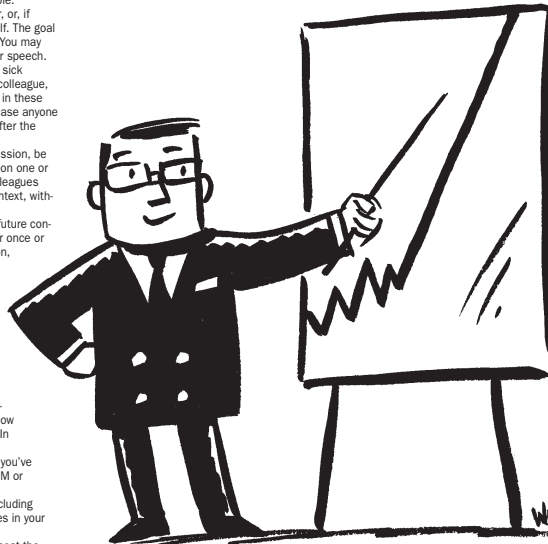
"Merchandise" the presentation: i.e., post the speech to your Web site, send it as an e-blast, and get it to journalists who may be covering related topics.

Identify prospects not at the conference, but who you know are involved or interested in the subject covered. Send them highlights of the presentation.

If it was a third-party or association-sponsored event, identify ways in which you can further participate in that organization's activities, including professional initiatives, pro bono activities, and additional presentation opportunities.

No doubt, other best practices may occur to you. Generally speaking, if it seems they'll be helpful to your prospects, they're worth doing. As with all good marketing, put yourself in the other guy's shoes. What kind of outreach would you appreciate if you were an audience member? What would maximize the value of the event for you?

It's common sense - but uncommon common sense.



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