

“A SALES DIRECTOR AT MY LAW FIRM?”

By Debra L. Rhodunda

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While sales departments have existed for eons in the corporate world, the idea is just beginning to emerge in the legal profession. More than 100 law firm marketers met at the Legal Marketing Association’s Mid-Atlantic Chapter meeting in February for a presentation and discussion of what could be a new trend in law firm business development.

The three-person panel pointed out that sales is different from marketing—and the difference is not merely semantic. Sales has a different focus and process. Sales professionals are not hired just to close deals; instead, their job is to assist attorneys through the process. Sales professionals help lawyers qualify leads, prepare for sales calls, participate at client team meetings and deal with key accounts.

Womble Carlyle hired the first ever Director of Sales at a U.S. law firm eighteen months ago. Right now there are only a handful of others. Could your firm be next?

Sales is something that marketing directors and marketing departments are currently handling to some degree. However, they are unable to devote the requisite time to it because it is just one of multiple marketing initiatives. And, as competition continues to increase (marked by legal market consolidation and rapid product segmentation), marketing directors will need to continue focusing on branding, positioning, and market research—all of which require a different set of skills and expertise.

One of the speakers at the LMA meeting was Steve Bell, Director of Sales at Womble Carlyle, the first ever Director of Sales at a U.S. law firm. He said he spends most of his time on the road teaming with lawyers to pitch clients. His responsibilities are exclusively sales oriented including identifying specific targets, understanding clients’ business issues, making contacts, and helping to close deals. He said the arrangement is working and business is coming in, and indicated that he expects to hire two more direct sales reps in the next six months.

Is Your Firm Ready?

The development of a sales department—perhaps better titled business development department—most likely will evolve naturally for some law firms as more and more lawyers realize that law firms are businesses and that they need to market and to build sales to keep up with competition. However, not all law firms are ready to hire a sales director or business development professional. Before they reach this stage, firms need

to support the requisite culture, understand what resources are needed to sell services and be ready to champion the sales position internally.

Don't be alarmed if your firm is not ready to embrace the idea of employing sales professionals. Many firms are not there yet. But, in order to remain competitive, developing a sales capability should be discussed and considered within the firm.

A sales training program for your lawyers is often a good first step in introducing some of the core concepts to the firm. A good sales program will teach hands-on business development skills to partners or senior associates, and help them:

- increase their comfort and skills in identifying and capturing business opportunities
- help them distinguish between commodity work and value-based services to identify areas where clients are more willing to pay full rates or premium rates
- identify cross-selling opportunities
- team sell
- improve their presentation skills

Whether or not your firm is ready, the “buzz” and actual hiring of sales professionals in law firms is on the rise—just something to think about and discuss at your next meeting.

About the author

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