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The Firm's Role in Associate Marketing

By Debra L. Rhodunda

When discussing marketing strategy with law firm management committees and other senior lawyers, consultants often say that every lawyer should contribute in some manner to marketing the firm. Make this same statement to a group of young associates and most may look like deer caught in headlights — even though associates know that the combination of sound client management and finding new clients are the path to partnership, few know exactly what to do or how to get started in marketing. Because not everyone is gifted with an innate ability to market, law firms need to step in and play a role in helping associates with skill-building, and also create a marketing culture where marketing at all levels is supported and rewarded.

Marketing Roles

A fundamental strategy for law firm marketing is to set up a marketing infrastructure where someone, or a group, is responsible and accountable for the firm's marketing function — not to actually perform marketing activities, but to lead that effort firm-wide. Firms without such an infrastructure tend to create a knowing-doing gap where firm members fully understand the benefits of marketing but tend to talk about it a great deal without any implementation.

While marketing involves almost every lawyer in the firm, increasing the awareness of marketing responsibilities and activities often falls to three people or groups:

- **Marketing Partners/Marketing Committees.** Marketing Partners or Marketing Committees are responsible for overseeing the implementation of marketing strategies and programs that create and sustain a competitive advantage for a law firm. While this complex directive includes numerous responsibilities, one task delegated to this group is responsibility for the development and implementation of individual marketing plans.

Individual marketing plans are documents outlining objectives and planned business development activities for each lawyer in the firm. Associates can benefit from developing these plans because they (1) help individuals focus on marketing strengths and weaknesses, and (2) create personal action plans with priorities and long-term skill-building activities.

The role of Marketing Partners/Marketing Committees is to help associates create a useful vehicle for providing focus and commitment. Developing realistic plans is key. Each activity should be a building block for those without the natural tendency to market. Because Marketing Partners and members of Marketing Committees are usually practitioners themselves, they tend to work in conjunction with Marketing Directors (if the firm has one) or with outside consultants to meet the needs of the firm.

- **Marketing Directors.** Marketing Directors often assume responsibility for current and future marketing plans and activities on a firm-wide basis, similar to the responsibilities described above, and work in conjunction with the Marketing Partner/Marketing Committee or directly with a Managing Partner. Strategy development or tactical implementation often correlates with the Marketing Director's level of sophistication and expertise. More sophisticated directors: (1) heighten an internal awareness of marketing activities; (2) instill an internal commitment to marketing efforts; (3) strive to develop in firm clients an awareness of firm strengths and services; and (4) recommend implementation methodologies to develop and maintain a high and positive public profile. Less experienced directors often focus on tactical issues such as coordinating seminars and other events.

Associates can gain helpful marketing insight from Marketing Directors through one-on-one assistance in developing individual

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marketing plans. Responding to an individual's request to develop a plan and build skills is a Marketing Director's dream because it is often difficult to get some lawyers interested in marketing. Marketing Directors are likely to have plenty of ideas for the involvement of associates in the firm's marketing, while at the same time associates appreciate the guidance.

efforts throughout the year, and assisting in revising the plan as circumstances dictate. They thus are able to ensure that group members are not overly invested in some areas while neglecting good opportunities in others. This helps to balance efforts, and tends to increase new business development potential through more targeted efforts.

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- **Practice Group Leaders.** Practice Group Leaders are the designated individuals who are responsible for group plan development, delivery of services, group profitability, marketing, coaching, communications and holding group members accountable. While practice groups are not marketing teams *per se*, Practice Group Leaders focus on marketing efforts that are likely to improve the group's external competitiveness.

Associates are more likely to create and implement individual marketing plans in firms where Practice Group Leaders have been designated. The reason is that practice group planning — where substantive client issues and marketing initiatives are developed and implemented — creates a natural flow of marketing activities for individual marketing plans.

Practice Group Leaders are charged with marketing responsibilities such as ensuring each group member develops an annual performance/contribution plan consistent with the group's objectives, monitoring of implementation

Marketing is an Ongoing Process

Individual marketing planning is not a one-time process. Periodic evaluation is critical. Law firms should develop a program to help associates analyze what is working and what is not paying off in order to allow individuals to fine-tune their plans. Whether it be through Marketing Partners/Marketing Committees, Marketing Directors, Practice Group Leaders — or a combination of all three — marketing and developing related skills are challenges for most associates that will require ongoing support from the firm. Without that support, associates may not reach their marketing potential to bring in suitable clientele and contribute to the bottom line, which, when you think about it, is the whole point of marketing. ♦

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MARKETING TIPS FOR ASSOCIATES:

- Create a contact list starting with law school classmates, college friends, fraternity/sorority contacts, community contacts you may have established, neighbors, etc. and communicate to each periodically (i.e., holiday cards, announcements, etc.)
- While attending community events, business meetings, etc., always introduce yourself to those sitting directly beside you (you will make contact with at least two new people each time) and follow-up with e-mail or a hand-written note on firm stationary.
- If your firm has a marketing director or a marketing department, introduce yourself to the marketing staff and investigate available resources and upcoming programs and events to see if there is an opportunity to get involved.
- Participate in your firm's sales training program or attend a similar seminar offered by outside consultants.
- Create brief but relevant material to be posted to your firm's website or distributed in firm communication vehicles. Not only will you enhance your writing skills, you will start to get your name out there and also make a friend for life with your marketing director or marketing staff who are always looking for updated material to distribute.
- Send items of interest to current or potential clients (coordinate with supervising lawyer) with a personal note, writing something like: "Saw this item and thought it would be of interest."
- At the firm's client events, ask senior lawyers to introduce you to clients you do not know.