



MARKETING

BY HEATHER SUTTIE

Time to ditch the old practice groups

Traditionally, law firms have organized themselves along the lines of practice groups, such as corporate/commercial, litigation, intellectual property, etc. While practice groups are helpful in managing talent and enabling knowledge sharing, by their nature, they are firm centric and the focus is on how lawyers see themselves and how the firm is structured internally.

In today's competitive environment, however, there is increasing pressure for law firms to become more client-centric and provide practice offerings that align with industry needs and focus on how clients conduct *their* business.

While major international and U.S. law firms have taken measures to create industry teams, there has been limited movement by Canadian law firms to embrace this idea.

Developing an industry focus

There are a number of reasons that support a move to industry teams:

- It can tell clients about your firm's industry expertise;
- It differentiates you in the legal marketplace;
- It generates more business from industry clients;
- It leads to developing industry-focused prospective client lists;
- It encourages targeted marketing communications relevant to industry clients.

Moving toward an industry focus isn't

an all-or-nothing proposition, but one that can and should be undertaken in carefully considered steps.

The first step is to examine your client roster and begin grouping clients by industry. Most, if not all, of your clients will have an industry code that can be found through Industry Canada (strategis.ic.gc.ca) or through the NA-ICS Association in New Jersey. For a less scientific approach, you can use the same industry categories as the *Financial Post* or *Fortune* magazine. Once data is compiled and clients are sorted by industry, you'll have a crystal-clear picture of the industries your firm serves.

Armed with this information, you'll be able to take the next step — deciding which industries (and therefore clients) you wish to focus on. The decision should be predicated on whether clients in your target industries have needs for the types of expertise your firm could provide and the ability to pay for it. You also need to ascertain if your firm has sufficient “bench strength” in terms of practitioners with demonstrated expertise and experience in those industries.

Forming an Industry Team


Once the commitment is made, you'll be ready to form an industry team. You can begin by focusing on one key industry at a time.

The most important factor will be choosing an industry team leader. While the lawyer with the most industry ex-

perience is an instinctive choice, don't overlook someone with lesser industry experience, but who possesses an eagerness to learn and lead, and who has organizational abilities and motivational skills. A leader who leads from the front will be your best choice.

When selecting team members, look for credibility. Each member must have genuine industry experience, or be dedicated to becoming an industry specialist. From this point on, the process involves mechanics and patience.

Mechanics include notifying clients that the team is in place, listing industry teams on your web site, taking an active role in industry associations, creating prospective industry client lists, and delivering relevant marketing material to current and prospective industry clients. As for patience, this is the most critical step of all in seeing the process through to success and you must take a far-sighted approach to profitability.

Lawyers are in the business of helping clients solve problems. Acting on an “it's about them” approach sends a clear signal to clients that your firm understands their business needs and has the industry know-how to get things done. 

Heather Suttie helps law firms, legal teams, and individual lawyers in all areas of practice realize greater success in the business of law. She has helped firms develop industry focus. More information can be found at heathersuttie.ca



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