

Straight talk on tip sheets, bios, and sales

Marketing need not be expensive endeavour

BY DARYL-LYNN CARLSON
For Law Times

There are numerous ways to bolster a firm's marketing initiatives without blowing the budget, say marketing specialists.

One effective means is to give stuff away for free, says Heather Suttie of Heather Suttie & Associates consultants in Toronto.

"Something for nothing: it's a terrific tactic," Suttie enthuses.

She's not talking legal advice, firm tee shirts, or Blue Jays tickets. Rather, solid information that can be helpful to clients and teach them just enough to pique their interest about the firm's services.

She touts checklists, tips sheets, and other small bits of sundry educational communiqués that can provide helpful pointers in an easily understandable format. They can be targeted at individuals or for industry sector clients, says Suttie, who recently spoke at the Toronto Law Office Management Association (TLOMA) annual conference near Barrie.

"Checklists are easy," she says as an example. "They're like laundry lists. Wills and estates, what do you need to prepare for? Things to think about when considering a merger. It's going to save the client money and enable them to come to the lawyer more prepared."

While most firms have newsletters by practice groups that are sent

to targeted clients, Suttie says few tip sheets and checklists originate from law firms.

"These are multi-purpose. They can be on the web site, in a newsletter, as a handout at a conference, or in the lawyers' own personal marketing packages," she says. "When I look at stats from my web site, the checklists are the highest number of downloads, by far."

At the TLOMA conference, Suttie focused on marketing through effective biography writing. She says bios — the brief description of professionals that prospective clients can read while shopping for a lawyer — can pack marketing punch if written effectively. They can share information, expertise, and personality.

She notes that writing a bio can be "either a cookie-cutter exercise or a merciless experience of ever-evolving track-changes. Neither needs to be the case."

But it can be a valuable tool to distinguish one's self from other competing professionals, she says.

"The problem with many bios is sameness, which is perpetuated by two factors. The first is modeling bios on those of other lawyers who have modeled their bios of those of other lawyers," she explains. "The second factor is a tendency to take an approach that, 'It's about me, the lawyer,' rather than, 'It's about them, the client.' This sameness problem can carry the symptoms



One way to bolster marketing initiatives is to give stuff away for free, says Heather Suttie, adding that, 'Something for nothing; it's a terrific tactic.'

of verbose stories told in legalese, jumbled laundry lists of various experiences, and a self-congratulatory tone," she observes.

"Given all this, is it any wonder that clients looking for legal talent can have a tough time differentiating one lawyer from another?"

In writing an effective bio, therefore, a lawyer must consider what the client wants to read rather than what the lawyer thinks should be conveyed. "You'll want to spark a client's curiosity, persuade a client to think, 'This is the lawyer for me,' and trigger action in the form of contacting a particular practitioner," she explains.

"This is where you must dare to be different. Being different within a profession schooled to be risk-averse can be a challenge."

Lawyers should focus on cutting to the chase in a meaningful way using information relevant to target clients, plain language, and a clean layout presentation using bullet points and short sentences to keep the bio brief.

She also suggests lawyers tout their successes with examples such as how they may have saved a client money on litigation using alternative dispute resolution, which identifies with people's budgets or pocketbooks.

A little known fact, she says, is that web sites provide means to present the lawyer's name and title on the top of the page frame, above the web page address, which is key to achieving a higher ranking return on search engines when clients seek lawyers specific to their needs. "For the technically challenged, this is something that can be done by web site programmers or perhaps your IT staff, she adds. But one marketing and management advisor suggests in the legal profession needs to shift focus.

"There's too much marketing and not enough selling," says Alastair Mills-McEwan, president of Flare Consulting Inc. in Ottawa. "Marketing is about getting the message out there, making sure there's brand awareness and

that people know who you are and what you do," he affirms.

But he asks, "Do you want to choose your clients or do you want them to choose you?"

"The essence of marketing is about making the phone ring but professional services over the years are becoming more enlightened and focusing more on sales."

While Mills-McEwan agrees firms need to get better at using plain speak, communicating with client prospects and parlaying their industry-specific knowledge, he urges lawyers to get bolder in reaching out. He points to regional business journals or other media that rank local industries.

"I would actually go, contact the CEO and tell them, 'You know, you're the sort of client our firm would like to have. Not trying to seduce you away from your current advisors, but can you imagine a circumstance where we could do some work for you?'"

He acknowledges that, "Those types are conversations are extremely rare in law. It's more of an, 'If you build it they will come.'"

But he says it could be easy as designating someone from within the firm who has a sales-type personality to network with clients who aren't yet on the firm's radar.

"Sales is something you can actually evaluate," he says. And really, "you don't have to be that aggressive." 