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Get Serious About Marketing This Fall

By Kimberly Alford Rice

With the lazy Summer days behind us, it is time to re-focus on your marketing plans. Below are a few tips which will help you advance your marketing goals of strengthening your existing client and referral relationships and cultivating new relationships with qualified prospects.

Fall is the time to get serious about marketing.

To maximize your limited non-billable time between now and year's end, follow these steps:

Focus your efforts. Set realistic goals of what to accomplish in the next 3 months realizing that "life gets in the way" all too frequently. Perhaps your goal is to visit 5 clients and ask how you are doing. Maybe you want to show your gratitude for the work you have received from a select group of clients by inviting them to an upcoming firm event. Whatever the activities, claim and commit to it.

Manage your time. Calculate how much non-billable time you can commit to marketing activities each week to achieve your objectives and plot them out on your calendar.

Maintain a weekly activity checklist. Invest some time jotting down concrete steps you will take to address advancing your relationship with existing clients (active and non-active) and quality referral sources, and specific steps you will take to "sow seeds" with qualified prospects.

Client Assessment

With 2011 right around the corner, the Fall is an ideal time to take an inventory of how much time you have invested in your current clients. Have you regularly maintained contact with them? Have you learned more about their industry and attended an industry meeting or conference with them? Have you spent some "non-office" time with them or visited their facility? Clients LOVE this stuff even if they don't say so and it sends a positive message that you value the relationship.

Most importantly, have you gauged your clients' level of satisfaction with the ongoing attorney-client relationship? Studies show that the more open communication you can deliver around meeting your clients' expectations, the stronger (and longer lasting) the relationship will be. Do not take anything for granted. If you are not comfortable having this conversation, retain a professional client interviewer to handle it objectively for you. Just make it happen for the sake of your long-term client relationships.

Referral Sources

The bread and butter of a healthy practice, referral sources, should be attended to regularly. Contact each referral source and schedule time to get together. Thank them for specific clients they have sent your way - or attempted to send your way. A successful referral relationship is reciprocal. If your practice does not lend itself to generate referrals for others, formulate ways to thank your referral sources for their kindness.

Prospecting

It is no one's favorite exercise, but prospecting need not be unpleasant. To be most successful, you want to become sensitized to new client opportunities wherever you are. Be educated in how to recognize prospective new business opportunities.

Before soliciting business from a new prospect, query your firm colleagues (or check your firm contact management system) to find out if anyone else has relationships with the company and/or person. Email your referral network, LinkedIn connections, and other professional service providers. Google a media search and check news clipping services (print and online) to see if that prospect has been in the media recently. Do your homework before making an initial contact.

When left to their own devices, many lawyers practice law rather than undertake marketing activities. Understandable. That can be a result of lack of formal education in the business development process, years of conditioning and reinforced by most firm compensation systems.

Remember this: if it took you years to fall into your current pattern, you are not likely to develop new habits overnight. Be patient with yourself. But, keep this in mind: In his book *True Professionalism*, David Maister states that billable hours determine today's income, but what you do with your non-billable time determines your future. Bingo!

There are hundreds of different ways to make marketing a more natural and enjoyable part of your everyday practice. Develop a system that works for you and be consistent in your efforts. You will enjoy the rewards if you persist.