



How To Make It Rain By Marketing Individual Lawyers

Law360, New York (June 24, 2011) -- Successful rainmakers will tell you that when they get business, it's usually a result of their own, individual marketing efforts. No surprise there; it takes a healthy ego to be a real rainmaker, after all. But underneath any braggadocio lies a truth: Individual lawyers, not law firm institutions, are what draw in clients. While the rationale behind using that truth to drive legal marketing is obvious for many lawyers, how exactly to execute it is not.

As we have heard repeatedly, general counsel say they "hire a lawyer, not a firm." The cliché is backed up by research that Hellerman Baretz Communications LLC commissioned from BTI Consulting Group Inc., which shows that introductions based on individual relationships (namely, referrals and in-person meetings) are the most effective methods of securing new business. Other recent research indicates that personal bio pages and LinkedIn profiles are more visited than firms' general home and practice pages.

The import of this research for law firm leaders, marketers and lawyers at large would seem to be obvious: If individual lawyers are the product clients are buying, they should also be the product you are marketing. The logic behind individualized campaigns is only becoming more forceful as communications tools grow more sophisticated and accessible. Whether through LinkedIn, Twitter, blog posts or another new medium, it is easier than ever for individual lawyers to make their presence known.

Despite the straightforward logic above, the idea that individual attorneys should be the centerpiece of marketing campaigns is, in fact, a new one for many law firms. For years, marketing departments within the largest firms have considered their primary mission to be promoting their firms' institutional brands, rather than individual attorneys.

Take, for instance, [Howrey LLP](#). That firm's big-ticket campaigns were all built around the marketing of the institution. Indeed, Howrey pioneered the art of marketing the law firm "brand." It was the first national firm to run a print advertising campaign, called "The Human Side of Genius," and even bought itself a product placement in the "Runaway Jury" movie.

To be clear, Howrey had an excellent marketing team, and its advertising campaigns were executed very well; as a result, it rightfully earned respect as a leader within the marketing community. But the firm's approach had a conceptual flaw. Howrey was selling Howrey, when it might have been selling its top products: Sean Boland, Robert Abrams, John Talady and Alan Wiseman. As John Hellerman (an author of this article) wrote recently in an article about Howrey here in [Law360](#), institutional brands are best sold to shareholders and potential shareholders (i.e., partners and laterals), while the shareholders (as expert talent) are best sold to clients.

However, it is important to be clear on this point: There are many legitimate reasons to engage in firm-level marketing, including, most significantly, to raise awareness of a firm in new markets. Steve Bell's (an author of this article) firm, [Womble Carlyle PLLC](#), has used a bulldog character named Winston (after the firm's home base, Winston-Salem, N.C.) to make an impression in new locations as it expands along the Eastern [Seaboard](#) and beyond. It is an effective device, but not the be-all and end-all of a marketing strategy. The awareness raised through Winston merely prepares the ground for lawyer-level marketing (and sales), which

actually brings in clients.

Despite there being a place for firm-level marketing, modern trends are working against it. Just as advances in communication tools have heightened the effectiveness of individualized marketing, hiring practices within corporate legal departments are simultaneously weakening bonds between clients and firms at an institutional level.

Ultimately, we believe the legal marketing industry is progressing toward the inevitable conclusion that marketing (selling) is simply most effective when emphasizing individual partners in addition to, and sometimes instead of, the firm as an institution. This article details the forces heightening the need for attorneys to focus on individualized marketing efforts, and provides guidance about how to create custom and effective individualized business development campaigns.

Forces at Work

A significant factor in the shift to individual attorney branding is the evolution of expectations from clients themselves. Increasingly, corporate clients seek to “unbundle” legal services. Instead of relying on a single law firm, clients are shopping around on a piecemeal basis to get the best service for the best possible value.

This unbundling of services places the focus squarely at the attorney level, not the firm level. Law firm marketing efforts should match that expectation.

The corporate world already has taken notice of the individual brand-building trend. One need only use names like “The Donald,” “Oprah,” or “Lil Wayne” to understand how far individual branding concepts have progressed. Or just look at how important Steve Jobs has been to selling the [Apple](#) brand.

So you are asking: “I understand why individual branding would be important in entertainment, media or even consumer electronics. But how does it relate to legal services?” The short answer is that in an oversaturated marketplace, differentiation is critical.

In just the last 20 years, the number of lawyers — in private practice, the public sector and in-house — has expanded from less than 800,000 in 1991 to more than 1.1 million today. Whether you are a private practitioner or an in-house lawyer, there is more competition than ever for the services and knowledge that you provide. Personal branding helps you to distinguish yourself in the workplace and to differentiate yourself from the internal, and external, competition.

In the last three years in particular, global economic turbulence has yielded an upheaval in the legal profession, and more lawyers than ever are finding themselves between jobs. The emergence of new legal technologies, new processes, and off-shore sources of legal services presages a potential reality that demand for traditional lawyering never will return. All of these factors create the need for individual lawyers to distinguish and differentiate themselves in an oversaturated market.

In-house lawyers, for instance, who have established a personal brand outside the corporate walls also enjoy an advantage. They can utilize their brands and their networks to identify business opportunities for their companies, and thus mitigate stereotypes as cost-centers.

In addition to helping companies carve out a niche in an increasingly crowded marketplace, individual brand-building campaigns are becoming more commonplace largely because they are increasingly feasible. Technology, particularly social media tools, has made it possible for attorneys in any market to carve out international reputations, even without the support of a slick institutional marketing campaign or large PR budget. With a little know-how and some tenacity, nearly any attorney can build an individual brand.

The ready availability of online publishing also eliminates the stumbling block of finding an outlet for your writing. Previously, many attorneys shied away from writing because of the scarcity of publishing outlets. But now, attorneys can readily reach an audience on their own terms.

Now, more than ever, attorneys have the incentive to build their individual brands. And now, more than ever, attorneys have the ability to build their individual brands.

How To Do It

For firms and lawyers that recognize the need to structure their efforts around the individual, the question becomes: Now what? The following are some concrete steps that individual attorneys can take to help themselves.

1) Define what you offer.

The first and most necessary step in any marketing campaign is to identify exactly what you offer. Attorneys should consider the specific need they fill for their clients, and what makes their service superior to others.

2) Ask for referrals.

Referrals are the most effective marketing technique for lawyers, and also the simplest. When a lawyer is doing good work, her clients will often be eager to give referrals. The hardest part may be getting over the reluctance to ask, but when done respectfully it's not an awkward conversation.

3) Obtain referral-equivalents through PR campaigns.

To get referrals, of course, you need influential referrers. If you lack those in your Rolodex, don't worry: that's exactly what individual-based PR campaigns are made to remedy. BTT's research shows that obtaining just three mentions from respected media outlets (industry trades, respected national publications, personal contacts), have nearly the same trust-building effect on prospective clients that personal referrals do.

4) Create content in your area of practice.

Thought leaders stand out. Creating valuable content about your area of practice will get you noticed quickly. Whether distributed through traditional outlets (e.g., trade publications) or "self-published" through blogs, social networks or e-newsletters, Internet-based sharing tools will get valuable content to the people that care about it.

5) Speak in small-group settings.

While a speaking engagement at a large conference may look nice on the resume, smaller-group environments are more conducive to relationship building. Unlike addresses to large audiences, which must have broad appeal, settings such as practice seminars are more likely to be focused on the attorney's specific area of expertise and have a business-oriented atmosphere.

6) Become a point of contact.

Making yourself a "water-cooler" stop for those in your field pays dividends and can be accomplished in any number of ways — creating an online gathering place through a successful blog, founding an association for a specialized industry that you service, and hosting an annual happy hour at an industry conference are just a few examples.

7) *Communicate what makes you successful.*

Clients might be impressed by an Ivy League education. What will truly impress them — and what they really want to know — is how a lawyer can help their business. This is what case studies do. A powerful story about how a specific lawyer helped a client brings that attorney's skills to life and allows clients to imagine how the lawyer might help them, as well. All lawyers should have case studies.

8) *Create powerful introductions.*

If your professional bio is anything like most in the legal industry, it does not convey a powerful enough impression — or tell readers much about you. Enhancing your bio with an enticing narrative or short video can tell visitors a lot about your service and your personality. Enriched bios give those who don't know you a much more significant glimpse at your professional persona and make it easier for prospective clients to pick up the phone and call.

9) *Repurpose your efforts.*

These previously listed tips aren't one-off activities — they can pay repeated dividends. The work that went into writing an article can be repurposed for a speaking engagement. A speech can be transformed into a blog post or client alert. All of these activities can be referenced as auxiliary materials on a bio, and any of them can provide the basis for an introduction to a reporter. "Recycling" in this way helps lawyers get a maximum PR benefit from their invested time.

10) *Share content.*

For the same reasons they should "recycle," lawyers and their firms should actively share the content that emerges from PR campaigns. Social networking tools, especially, make it extremely easy for lawyers to share their media quotations, articles and other PR material with their online networks and personal contacts, who in turn may pass it to their own networks. In this way, lawyers become influential voices and build their presence within communities rich with business development potential.

Focusing marketing efforts on individual lawyers in addition to law firm institutions has always made sense. Forces at work today, including the content-sharing features of Internet-based services and hiring practices of corporate legal departments, have only made it more imperative to make individual lawyers the centerpiece of marketing campaigns. Thankfully, the tools for marketing departments and individual lawyers to make this shift are readily available and ready to be exploited by savvy lawyers and firms.

--By Steve Bell (pictured), Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice PLLC, and John Hellerman, Hellerman Baretz Communications LLC

[Steve Bell](#) is the chief client development officer in the Washington, D.C., office of Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice. [John Hellerman](#) is a partner and co-founder of Hellerman Baretz Communications in Washington.

The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the firm, its clients, or Portfolio Media, publisher of Law360. This article is for general information purposes and is not intended to be and should not be taken as legal advice.