

# Successful Practice Area Marketing

By Theresa DeLoach and Gabrielle B. Lipson



Whether you are launching a new practice area initiative at your firm or fine-tuning your marketing of an existing practice area, engaging in some strategic thinking and planning at the outset will help you prioritize and focus your efforts, as well as maximize your time and your marketing dollars. Law firms and corporations are increasingly finding that specialization (and becoming recognized as experts in a particular field) is an advantage. This trend represents a shift from past ideas regarding practices and any marketing related to the practice. As a result of this shift, marketing and practice development personnel are being tasked with finding new ways to effectively engage in practice-specific marketing.

## Conduct a Practice Area Assessment

Before you launch yet another direct-mail campaign or plan your next client cocktail reception, clearly define the value proposition of the practice group. The value proposition should be a tangible statement of how a client will benefit from engaging the attorneys in the practice, and it will drive how you deploy marketing tactics to connect your practice area to its target.

In addition to the value proposition, it is helpful to identify any differences between the internal and external perceptions of lawyers at your firm, as well as the perceptions of clients, prospects and competitors. For example, the members of a firm's transactional group may consider themselves adept at helping in-house counsel evaluate and minimize litigation risk, whereas clients and competitors may perceive them as reluctant to try cases. It is also useful to work with members of your firm to understand the financial picture of the practice group. Appropriate contacts include billing department personnel, revenue analysts and the practice group chair. Note the group's actual revenue, revenue projections and revenue trends and compare them to figures from other practice groups at your firm; also note any differences across offices. Work with your firm's librarian to research trends in case filings to understand the practice's market position.

While this process may seem tedious at the initial stages, it is critical because the group's perception of its financial picture and profitability will affect whether it will adopt or resist your marketing efforts. It will also guide you in determining the amount of time and resources to commit to the endeavor. In addition, demonstrating your understanding of the practice



group's financials will help solidify your relationships within the group and build the credibility you will need to successfully execute marketing tactics.

## Know Your "Practice Area Space"

After assessing the value proposition of the practice, but before engaging in practice-specific marketing, it is important to understand your practice area space—the market for the particular practice area, its clients and competitors. This step is critical to helping you calibrate your efforts. When surveying the landscape, consider the following:

- ▶ What client and competitor messages already occupy space?
- ▶ What are the official messages?
  - Is there language being used to market the practice?
  - Are there prevailing themes?
  - What taglines do competitors use?
- ▶ What are the unofficial messages?

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Uncovering unofficial messages can be challenging, as these come from word of mouth and your practice's reputation rather than print messages, websites or branding. While unofficial messages are less tangible, they are an important reflection of your clients' impressions of your practice, accurate or otherwise. Such messages will help you understand who clients view as industry leaders and identify opportunities for your practice to distinguish itself. One way to obtain this information is through conversations with those in the marketplace. Develop these conversations through meetings and informational interviews with current or prospective clients. Asking a client what they think tells them that you value their business and opinion. For instance, an initial question in this area could be, "Is there something that we or other competitors in the area could be doing differently?" A client meeting can also help you determine what other firms they are using. Gleaning the quantity and quality of service they are receiving from competitors can help you further focus your research.

You can also obtain unofficial messages about the practice area through client surveys and auditing. Many attorneys are wary

of asking clients to rate their particular performance. Taking a more general approach to client auditing may help lessen the apprehension. For example, if you make the inquiry more about the practice area or market overall, without singling out a particular firm or attorney, you will find that clients are often more candid, which makes their input invaluable.

Here are some questions to ask during a meeting or in a client survey:

- ▶ Whom do you consider experts in this area?
- ▶ What makes their expertise so helpful?
- ▶ How is this service being delivered?
- ▶ Do you favor certain fee arrangements?
- ▶ What technology is being used to deliver the service?

## Additional Specific Techniques for Practice Area Marketing

### Utilize Social Media

Some law firms and corporations remain dubious about the utility of social media. However, the use of LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and company blogs has increased exponentially in the last few years. Social media is a marketing powerhouse and should be incorporated on some level in your practice-specific marketing. A number of those who have used social media for marketing have reported acquiring customers through one of its many channels. In addition to lead generation, social media can be used to drive brand awareness.

Branching into social media can feel initially overwhelming. A number of individuals, associations and companies conduct training on the various functions of social media platforms. Research those offering training and get referrals from others. You can learn a great deal in this area, and you become an asset when you are knowledgeable about how to best utilize those platforms.

### Practice Community Development and Participation

One of the best ways to engage in practice-specific marketing is to make contacts and participate within the community. Research and discover where members of your target group are online and in person. Are there any organizations/associations that are popular with practitioners/clients? If so, attend those meetings and gather intel from the members about the practice. Another place to cultivate connections and acquire information about the community is online. Many groups have message boards and LinkedIn groups where they freely share information. Consider gaining access to those areas; you will learn an incredible amount regarding the needs of that group.

### Interview/Network and Ask for Referrals

As you make inroads with organizations and online groups, it can be useful to create a matrix to track introductions and connections. Create a separate section for cold contacts. Reach out to your contacts to request a meeting for coffee or lunch. This meeting will help you gather information about

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the practice area, its key players and recent trends; raise your profile in the space; and likely yield additional contacts. Be sure to ask your interviewee for additional referrals so that you can continue to expand your network.

### Bring Opportunities for Practice Development to Attorneys

Leverage your network and contacts to identify opportunities for your attorneys to participate in panels and CLE programs. You may find that attorneys who deem themselves too busy to engage in business development are much more willing to help you execute a program that you've brought to them, complete with a date, venue, speakers and materials.

Put the knowledge you've gained through networking and interviewing to good work by suggesting and pitching article topics that you know will resonate with your practice area's clients.

### Identify Common Causes That Can Serve as Platforms for Building Client Relationships

Look beyond the day-to-day business of your practice area to find common values, passions and areas of interest with your clients. If you are marketing your firm's employment practice group, many employment clients are also active in their firms' diversity, women and other workplace initiatives. Seek ways to partner with your clients on pro bono or volunteer activities, or share best practices about your firm's green initiative.

### Streamline Your Marketing

Once you accomplish the previous techniques, make sure your marketing efforts reflect your practice area initiative. Answer the following questions clearly; they will help drive your activities:

- What message(s) are you sending to the marketplace?
- Do you have any specific taglines? Themes? Colors?
- Are they consistent on the Web? In collateral? In advertising?

In conclusion, while practice-specific marketing can be challenging, it can lead to successful results. The key is to plan at the outset and be strategic with your execution. While there are no magic bullets, the above tips will put you on the right path to successful practice area marketing for your law firm or corporation.

## Additional Practice-specific Marketing Tips from Our JAMS Colleagues Nationwide

"Identify the endgame, preferably before you begin. It is important to remember that some marketing and practice development goals need expiration dates and should not be added to your recurring workload. Decide in the planning stages when a goal will be considered 'complete.'"

**John Pardun**, JAMS senior practice development manager, Southwest

"Read, read, read. It's very important to read trade press related to the specific practice area that is your focus in order to stay on top of recent trends that might affect your marketing strategies."

**Renee Spertzel**, JAMS practice development manager, San Francisco

"Even in today's digital age, 'showing your face and pressing the flesh' at practice area-related conferences and events should ALWAYS be part of the marketing mix. You can then use social media to announce and promote prior to, and update your 'network' after, events."

**Nicolas Machado**, JAMS practice development manager, Northwest

"Expand your practice area network outside the firm. As good as your organization is, it provides a limited number of contacts you can use to develop successful practice area marketing. Develop a short list of loyal outside contacts within your practice area to go to when ideas run thin or stale internally. This type of expanded network outside of your firm will add to your overall practice area knowledge and ensure a continuous cycle of new marketing ideas for you to consider."

**Todd Drucker**, JAMS practice development manager, East Central ■

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