

Smart law firms ramp up marketing during economic slowdowns

By Martha Cusick Eddy

Martha Cusick Eddy is a partner with Marketing Evolutions, a strategic marketing company that helps law firms develop and implement programs that fuel growth. She can be contacted at (720) 231-2183 or Martha@marketingllp.com.

As law firm clients take steps to cut costs and weather the current economic crisis, many of these clients will re-evaluate their existing relationships with lawyers and law firms – even long-term relationships that have weathered many storms over many years.

What's a law firm to do in this situation? The answers to this question are often counterintuitive.

First, vigorously protect the relationships your firm has with its existing clients. In this economic climate, client satisfaction is more important than ever before. If your clients are looking for someplace to cut, they will first eliminate firms that provide poor service. Make sure that your clients understand and appreciate your value.

Then, intelligently invest in ongoing marketing efforts – even though these are the first places many law firms look to cut costs. As your competitors pull back on their efforts, they remove clutter from the marketplace and leave the field wide open for your firm's unique message. Take this opportunity to position yourself and your firm for more work now – and in the future.

Finally, aggressively pursue business development. The instability of long-standing relationships caused by this economic crisis creates a unique opportunity to capture additional business from current clients (who are eliminating some of their other firms) and new business from new clients (who are looking for better deals). Stalk vulnerable relationships with offers of unique skill, lower cost or better service.

Savvy law firms know that an economic downturn can be a prime opportunity to capture more business. Here are some specific suggestions.

Find out how your clients are hurting. Focus on helping your clients weather the economic storm. Schedule meetings with your top clients

(off the clock) to learn about their businesses, how the economy will affect them, and what you can do to help them survive and thrive in a new economic era.

Prepare for these meetings by reviewing:

- *Industry trends* -- Have there been layoffs or consolidations?
- *For public companies* -- Earnings reports and stock trends
- *For private companies* -- Industry association Web sites and local business publications
- *Google Alerts* -- Ideally, you have created these to monitor online news about your clients.
- *Industry associations* -- Ideally, you have joined these to meet key players, understand their moves and learn how you can assist your clients by integrating your legal strategies with their business strategies.

Provide your clients with innovative solutions. Focus on serving your clients as a trusted business advisor – a resource who discovers creative and innovative ways to solve problems during an economic crisis.

To come up with creative solutions, you might try:

- *Connections* -- Connect your clients to other advisors you know (business operations experts, HR gurus, management advisors and others), who might be able to provide you and your clients with an innovative perspective on the challenges your clients are facing.
- *Tours and interviews* -- Schedule a site tour of your client's facility and interview a wide variety of people there -- to better understand your client's needs and decision-making process.

Coach your lawyers. When law firms look for ways to cut costs during an economic downturn, training budgets are often the first to go. Don't make this mistake! Continue to coach and train your lawyers -- so they are equipped to take advantage of these unprecedented market opportunities now and hit the ground running in the future.

Consider conducting the following low-cost alternatives:

- *Rainmaker sessions* – An internal session where a leading firm rainmaker discusses successful strategies for business development.
- *Management sessions* – An internal session where successful client managers discuss their strategies and tactics for client retention and management.

- *Client panels* – An internal program where your top clients are invited to share with lawyers and support staff what works (and does not work) when it comes to law firm service, support and quality.

Communicate with your clients. When you face unprecedented competition for good work, all of your firm's communications tools must be focused and coordinated.

Carefully examine your firm's:

- *RFP response process* -- Resist the temptation to respond to every RFP with a boilerplate proposal. A strategic approach to RFPs will help you spend wisely and achieve a higher rate of success. A good approach consists of a formal "go/no-go" evaluation system, a formal due diligence program to gather information prior to crafting a response, streamlined proposal generation software, and custom content-generation timetables that make sure content is specific to a potential client's unique needs – not generic!
- *Presentation skills* -- When you are engaged in face-to-face conversation to develop new business, good presentation skills can make all the difference. Training can help you build rapport quickly, move from "qualifications review" to "in-depth needs dialogue," and develop strategies to demonstrate intangible work product in a way that resonates with a potential client.
- *Focus on business development* -- When business development funds are scarce, every dollar must count. A good business development coach can help you avoid the needless expense incurred by "random acts" of lunch, golf and other activities. Each interaction with a client must be strategic, be focused and result in an "advance" of the relationship towards the goal of new business.

Love the one you're with. If you are looking for ways to save money, understand that it is much less expensive to get more work from an existing client than it is to get new work from a new client. Never overlook the potential in your existing relationships. Adopt marketing programs that cultivate current and past clients.

Programs to consider include:

- *Cross selling* -- Ask your existing clients about their needs outside of the specific areas of service you are currently providing. When you know which issues will challenge them in 2009, put together an on-

- site seminar or roundtable discussion to address those needs -- and to introduce the client to this new subset of services.
- *Introductions* -- Make the simple effort to introduce your clients to other lawyers in your firm -- especially those that practice in an expressed "need attention" area.
 - *Communications audits* -- Audit your existing communications tools -- like alerts and newsletters -- to make sure they educate past and current clients on the full range of services your firm offers.

Measure satisfaction. During these difficult economic times, it is essential that you "bullet-proof" your current clients against poaching by your competitors. Perhaps you have plans for a client service initiative gathering dust on your shelf. Now is the time to dust it off and put it into practice!

The most effective client satisfaction program include:

- *Segment* -- Segment your top clients (by revenue earned and revenue potential) and conduct in-depth interviews with them to better understand how you are meeting their needs -- and where you can deliver better or more service.
- *Debrief* -- Debrief your clients at the end of each matter or case to discover what went right and what went wrong with the interaction -- so you can continuously improve your service.
- *Benchmark* -- Develop an annual benchmarking survey to see how your clients rate you -- overall -- on service, responsiveness, and other key variables.
- *Share* -- Use the information from your interviews, debriefing and surveys to create a "state of firm service" report for all lawyers and support staff -- to maintain a firm-wide focus on client satisfaction and top-notch service delivery.

In this tough economy, no law firm or law practice is immune to client defections -- and their frightening economic repercussions. Competition will only get tighter in 2009. Following these (sometimes counterintuitive) suggestions will help you not only weather the economic downturn, but also carve out a distinct competitive advantage -- so you can hit the ground running when the economy makes its inevitable recovery.