

Enduring Business Development Lessons from the Pandemic

By David Ackert and Donna Fulmer

The pandemic forced many changes on firms, and as we begin looking at the past year through the rearview mirror, some were fortunately positive. It had a significant impact on business development, and savvy leaders in firms of all sizes managed to turn a proverbial lemon into lemonade.

In May, Ackert, Inc., a business development consulting and technology company with over 20 years' experience in elevating law firm revenue growth, surveyed firms across the nation and asked how often lawyers have been engaging in business development over the past 12 months. On a scale of 0-to-10 (0 being not at all, 5 being off and on, and 10 being frequently) the average response was 6.3. The most frequent response (20%) was 5. Legal marketing departments and business developers clearly had their work cut out for them.

The survey also asked what the biggest obstacles to successful business development were. Not surprisingly, three-quarters of respondents reported that lawyers were uncomfortable with virtual business development. On a positive note, they also revealed that tech adoption amongst lawyers increased, especially for those who had low tech adoption scores pre-pandemic.

In a recent webinar, "Business Development Lessons Learned from the Pandemic," David Ackert, President of Ackert Inc., spoke with a panel of three marketing executives from mid-sized firms hailing from different regions of the US. The panelists shared that their firms enjoyed considerable client and business development wins in the past year by getting creative and making the most of uncharted territory.

The panelists shared that over the past twelve months, thought leadership was a critical strategy for legal marketing as clients and prospects regularly faced new business and legal challenges. Chief Marketing Officer Kim Perret of Jones Walker, reported, "We tripled down on our thought leadership. We went to our clients and found out what they were most concerned about." Whether communicated via webinars, email alerts, earned media, or other formats, clients and prospects were eager for insights and information.

While it is more feasible for a sizeable marketing department to produce webinars, turn out frequent newsletters and alerts, and get bylined articles published, the panelists stressed that what worked best during the months of the pandemic were strategies and tactics available to firms of any size.

Miller Nash Chief Client Officer Cynthia Voth shared, "Our managing partner pointed out early in the pandemic that the playing field has been leveled...Now it's down to the nuts and bolts and who's sending out great thought leadership and getting themselves out there."

The panelists revealed several business development lessons learned while navigating the pandemic that will serve firms well into the future.

Share the Load

Putting on webinars and podcasts, writing white papers, and even planning virtual events can be heavy lifts in terms of resources. One way to leverage stretched bandwidth is to co-author or co-present with colleagues, clients, or referral sources and to co-host events with relevant organizations.

Regarding events, Voth commented, “We partnered with the industry and professional associations whose events, conferences and luncheons our attorneys normally attend. They couldn’t hold their in-person events, so we were able to lend use of our (virtual event hosting) platform and co-hosted events...It created an even stronger relationship with those groups, and it put us in front of their members, who are clients and referral sources.”

Sharing the load not only allows busy business development teams to do more with less, but it can also foster goodwill and demonstrate that a firm is collaborative.

Get Personal

Relationships are all about connection, and connection was sorely lacking over the past year. Each of the panelists emphasized the importance of personal touches which paid off for their firms over the months of the pandemic. They asked lawyers to pick up the phone a few times each week and ask how clients were doing and inquire about their needs. Rather than relying on mass email blasts to disseminate valuable information, the lawyers who navigated the pandemic successfully took the time to include personal notes that nurtured important relationships.

Trenam Law Chief Marketing and Business Development Officer Lori Rabinowitz shared, “We would send out an alert, but tell attorneys to send it personally to contacts and people they think it really matters to.” She continued, “We recently had a virtual GC panel and every GC said they liked it when their attorney sent them the alert or thought leadership personally.”

Voth added, “It speaks volumes when clients know you care about their concerns and their challenges and their needs and know that you are there for them... It’s one thing to have people on an email blast, but it’s another for an attorney to specifically, in a personal way, send a note to a client or potential client highlighting, ‘here’s why I think this is something worth reading’.”

Embrace the Benefits of Virtual

While Zoom fatigue was an undeniable issue over the past year, the three business development experts have no plans to abandon virtual presentations and events any time soon. Perret commented, “Talking about what’s going to continue, I think being able to connect virtually and giving people more access is going to be very helpful. It certainly was helpful this past year.”

She stressed that personal follow-up is easy to manage after virtual presentations. Referring to the webinars her firm presented during the pandemic, she commented, “We were able to be very systematic about following up. If someone asked a question, we could track it and follow up. We always had attorneys follow up personally if there were more substantive questions happening in the webinar Q & A. And we always sent out surveys afterward to see if people wanted additional discussion or if they wanted info on a different topic, and we used that feedback to inform the next webinar.”

An additional benefit is that virtual meetings and events allow people to remain connected while saving time and money.

Be Resourceful

Developing thought leadership can be time-consuming. Rabinowitz suggested subscribing to the mailing lists of referral sources and sharing their relevant content – along with credit, of course. If it’s valuable

information, it will be appreciated. She advised, “Use that information to contact your clients. Going back to personal outreach, you don’t have to write it; you can use it and apply it for your purposes for your clients to show them what they need to do.”

Voth recommended leveraging social media, which is full of content to be curated and shared. She said, “It doesn’t cost a thing but time and a little knowledge, so it’s available to all size firms; you just need to engage with it.”

Perret recommended using technology to supplement in-house marketing resources. She said, “There are services that can help firms, even solo practitioners, disseminate thought leadership in a personal way on a regular basis.”

Play to Lawyers’ Strengths

When choosing the types of thought leadership to create, the panelists stressed the importance of considering the firm’s resources, including lawyers. Every firm has experts that can provide valuable insights, even if it’s best for someone else to write about them or present them. As Voth pointed out, “The good news is that you have experts within your ranks. It doesn’t matter how many there are, you can offer thought leadership. It’s just a matter of putting fingers to the keyboard and being thoughtful about how you do it.”

When choosing webinar presenters, the panelists advised to make sure to select lawyers who are comfortable in front of the camera and have the time and commitment needed to prepare and rehearse, as well. Voth continued, “If you’re going to give a presentation at a conference, make sure you’re prepared and you’re doing a good job of it. Ultimately, you’re trying to instill confidence in your skills, your knowledge and abilities, and if you’re not well prepared, you’re not going to come through as credible.”

The three panelists agreed whether a firm is returning to work, continuing to work from home, or a combination of both, the hybrid approach is here to stay. And while client service and business development will continue to be virtual, personal connection is critical for developing relationships. Ultimately, thought leadership is a commodity, and its value is likely to decline as clients’ and prospects’ uncertainty declines. *Relationships* foster loyalty, and every firm should continue to cultivate their key relationships as part of their ongoing business development strategy.

The webinar, “Business Development Lessons Learned from the Pandemic,” is available [on demand](#).