

What is the Cost of Marketing Complacency in 2013?

By Kimberly Alford Rice

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How many of us remember the great tagline “Be All That You Can Be”? Where was this first spoken? Yep, it was a popular slogan of the US Army from 1980-2001. An oldie but a goodie.

I was reading an article in *The Times* recently in which a study reported that once complacency sets into a workplace it functions much like an organizational cancer, slowly eating away at the core values of the firms. This prompted my thoughts on lawyers and their marketing behavior.

Regardless of the present economic conditions, your practice (and by extension, your law firm) will grow and contract in relation to predictable economic cycles. What goes up has to come down, and so forth. Point being, while your workload may be overwhelming today, if not properly attended to, you could find the client list growing shorter and shorter. And then, non-existent.

Don't think it could happen to you? Hope not for your sake, but experience tells me very differently.

I liken this process to growing a garden. As a girl, I worked in my grandparents' vegetable garden for many summers. What a life-changing experience that was.

In the Springtime, my grandfather would prepare the soil for planting. My grandmother and I would come behind him and hoe out the lines for sowing the seeds and young plantings- - green beans, cantaloupe, tomatoes; carrots, potatoes, watermelons, onions, and so on. After this laborious task, we would lay down straw to discourage weeds from growing in between the seeds and plantings. Then, through the next 3-4 months, my grandmother, cousins and I would monitor the rain gauge to ensure all the seeds were being properly watered to grow their produce.

There were years where we did not receive enough rain (and, in fact, experienced a drought) and resorted to turning on the garden sprinklers to keep the plantings alive. We even had to “hoe between the rows” so that some weeds wouldn't strangle the plantings. As a girl of 8 or so, these were boring, arduous tasks but necessary nonetheless.

In the end, however, the plants produced, we picked the “fruits of our labor” and enthusiastically enjoyed the harvest of fresh melons, hearty beans and robust tomatoes. In the end, I learned that to reap what you want; you must first sow the “right” things in the appropriate way. There is no room for complacency if your goal is to produce.

To relate this anecdote to marketing, the most important thing you can do is avoid complacency. Never allow yourself to settle and accept your results as predestined.

Building a prosperous client base is similar to the uphill climb of the roller coaster. It is hard work and can be a slow and sometimes bumpy ride. Client relationships are usually built the hard way, one client and one matter at a time. Many marketing tactics, like educational programming, building a healthy referral network, have a cumulative effect that may take time to produce measurable results. Eventually, though, your consistent and persistent efforts will begin to bear consistent results. As the roller coaster clears the peak it builds speed with minimal effort as it descends. So, too, with marketing efforts. Momentum builds and eventually the growth takes on a life of its own with less and less effort on your part.

Here is where the potential problem arises: you are lulled into a false sense of security that clients are now retaining you with little or no “sowing” effort on your part. It is at this precise point that without you even realizing it, your practice is headed to decline (refer to the afore-mentioned predictable economic cycles).

Your practice moves along swimmingly, you are performing at peak levels, clients love you which provides further affirmation to continue doing what you are (and are not) doing. Then, it happens. One of your largest clients makes a game-changing decision which may take the form of buying another company, selling its company, declaring bankruptcy, or some other major change which immediately places your relationship in jeopardy. We have all seen these scenarios play out, often with a less than favorable outcome.

As a result of one of these moves, your client base is looking a little shaky and you are scratching your head on how to replace the work you may have lost or, at minimum, seen reduced.

Though your practice may be somewhat different than that described above, with changing a few of the specifics, this could be you.

The main point, here, is regardless of how healthy your practice may seem today, there is absolutely no guarantees. In other words, if you do not attend to expanding your existing relationships, growing your network, and courting your solid referral sources, the stream of your pipeline will keep flowing.

By the time you get around to doing something about it, you may find yourself once again in the position of the roller coaster chugging up the hill. It will take a lot of effort to regain the momentum. Only now you have been away from the activity for a while, it appears even more difficult which is even more problematic.

As we head into the new year, do not allow yourself to float into complacency and be lulled by a false sense of security. Take notice of the state of your client base, of the number of referrals you are receiving, and giving, and how much effort is being earnestly invested in building and building upon the momentum of developing and growing a prosperous client base. Do not accept complacency to seep into all that you are and have been working for. If you need ideas or guidance on how to jumpstart your marketing efforts, let us know how we can help.

Otherwise, continued success in 2013. And remember, you can still “be all that you are meant to be”!