

You Are Not Alone

By Sharon Berman

This rough economy has been a great equalizer for law firm marketing. Attorneys from firms of all shapes and sizes are asking what they can do in this economy to build their business, and where to begin. The State Bar says that about 70% of the members work in small and solo firms, but even partners in large firms are scratching their heads about what to do.

Here's a question I received recently that fairly well sums up what's facing a lot of attorneys today:

Dear Sharon:

I've been practicing immigration and family law for about a dozen years.

I formed my own firm early in my career. My business comes from referrals from clients, colleagues, friends and family, and in the past it used to come steadily without the need for marketing. Since the middle of last year, however, the phones aren't ringing as much as they used to and business has really slowed down.

Some years ago, I had a website designed, but I'm not sure if it generates any business. Which of my two practice areas should I promote? I also prepare estate plans occasionally, so I'm wondering if that is a service I could market. I enjoy networking with colleagues, but when I get busy I don't keep it up.

I know it's time to start doing things to market my practice, but I don't know where to start.. Can you help me with some advice?



Dear Emerging Marketer:

You're hardly alone. Many attorneys are in a similar situation. Here are some recommendations to get you started.

The starting point, and the core of any marketing program is a database — your list of prospective, current, and former clients, referral sources, colleagues, and influencers. These are people with whom you need to communicate regularly.

If you're relying on informal lists kept in different places, e.g., business cards stuffed in drawers, you don't have an effective database, and you cannot communicate efficiently with your target markets.

A clean and up-to-date database is the first prerequisite for any marketing effort.

Start by gathering all of your contacts' information and enter it into some format which can be manipulated efficiently. Many attorneys use Microsoft Outlook, ACT!, or other database programs. It's not ideal, but you can start to create your database in spreadsheet programs like Excel or Google Spreadsheets.

As you enter your contact information into the database, "scrub" it to make sure the information is current and error-free.

Next, segment your database so that you can target your marketing. For example, use simple intuitive code words to distinguish people who should receive material about family law from those who would be interested in your immigration services. In some cases, you can add several 'codes' to a contact who would be interested in several of your different offerings (i.e., family law AND immigration).

Lawyers in both practice areas you mention — immigration and family law — have the opportunity to generate good leads through their websites. Take this opportunity to update the website you had designed several years ago. Make sure the copy quickly and clearly reflects your expertise and cases today. It's one of the first things a prospective client or referral source will check. In addition, you'll want to start educating yourself regarding search engine optimization (SEO) — appearing as high as possible in the search engines. Many successful attorneys drive visitors to their websites by using keyword-targeted Google and Yahoo ads which cost pennies per click.

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Since you're not sure whether your website is working, you probably don't effectively track where your business referrals and inquiries comes from. Tracking does not have to be complicated. Start with something as simple as a tic sheet for incoming phone calls and emails, and be sure to track the sources of not just new clients, but leads as well. Over time, as you analyze the results, you will garner valuable information to help you develop a marketing game plan.

If your hard-copy marketing materials are also out-of-date, this is the time to revise them. Start with something as simple as one sheet of paper summarizing your practice and credentials. This will give you something to distribute at networking meetings or forward ahead of time to a prospect or referral source you're about to meet — something that legitimizes you. You'll probably want to do separate one-sheets for immigration and family law.

Your two practice areas put you in an excellent position to build a referral network with other attorneys in small and solo firms. Because the scope of what you do is focused in the two areas, you have the opportunity to make outgoing referrals, which one of the most powerful ways to build incoming referral relationships. Every outbound referral you make is an investment in getting a referral back, and not necessarily from the same person. Because you're not an expert in estate planning, you should refer that work out, building referral relationships, rather than taking it on yourself. That work is only a distraction for you, keeping you away from your core expertise.

A particularly good way to build visibility in your target markets and reinforce your credibility is through writing or speaking, whichever appeals to you most. If you enjoy writing, for example, create some simple articles on "10 Things You Must Know

About..." or "The 10 Most Common and Costly Mistakes in..." Regardless of whether they are published in a newsletter, newspaper, or magazine, you have to post them on your website and create reprints to mail and distribute at networking meetings. If you enjoy speaking, leverage your writings by turning them into presentations.

Consider viewing today's economy as an opportunity, not a threat. You're ahead of the game because you have longevity and a client base. A little downtime now will help to focus you on getting your marketing house in order. Get started now. As you ramp up, you won't have to wait for the economy to catch up with you. ■

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