

Developing The Law Firm Marketing Mix: Resisting The Silver Bullet

By Les Altenberg

The law firm of today is faced with an enormity of marketing choices. One can take the traditional route of advertising, giving seminars, getting articles published, doing the “rubber chicken” circuit, developing brochures and other sales materials and for some, perhaps even implementing some kind of direct marketing effort. Or, one can join the 21st century and engage in such exotic activities as search engine optimization, pay-per-click, podcasts, blogging, and social media. Depending on each firm’s situation, any and/or all approaches can be valid.

Yet, critical to successful marketing is not just generating laundry lists of good ideas on how to promote the practice. There are literally hundreds of good ideas and thousands of communications vehicles. Rather, the key to effective marketing is selecting which of these ideas and which of these vehicles is best suited to achieve firm objectives.... and this is the critical part....*within the constraints of its time and dollar resources.*

Good marketing is integrated marketing, where the various components all work together complementing and underscoring one another. For example, a pay-per-click campaign with newspaper ads and press releases are used to promote a seminar sponsored by the firm. At the event, the firm’s brand is reinforced through its presentation and the distribution of helpful informational brochures, folders, etc. After the seminar, contact is maintained with those who registered through e-newsletters. More useful information is added to the web site, along with perhaps a new article written by one of the firm’s attorneys. All must “sing the same tune,” but also be done within the confines of time and money.

The individual or committee charged with developing and implementing a marketing program must look at each medium and each marketing-related decision within the context of its overall plan. If its goal is to generate new business immediately, this will lead to a certain set of decisions as to what vehicles to utilize. The same can be said for those with long-range visions, those targeting niche areas or for those with particularly large or particularly small marketing budgets.

Problems arise however when, in seeking the silver bullet for business growth, law firms grasp at single source solutions that fit the provider’s own offerings rather than solutions that address the specific objectives and strategies of the firm itself. The most prevalent, though hardly the only example of this is the preponderance of pay-per-click and SEO firms that purport to take your practice to the next level by promising high search engine rankings, thousands of clicks and even the auditing of phone calls and in-take messages.

The entire premise of “one size fits all” is anathema to what marketing is all about. At its very core, the marketing process is about communicating why an individual or organization should hire the firm versus the myriad of its competitors who are as readily accessible. To expect that a single source solution can address that challenge alone is a byproduct of overselling on the part of the vendor and wishful thinking on the part of the firm.

To illustrate this, let us take a look at a typical small to mid-sized firm seeking to generate more business for its family law section, with particular emphasis placed on reaching an affluent population. A pay-per-click vendor offers to have the firm placed prominently on the sponsored section of the major online directories’ first page. The sell is that whenever anyone searches for keywords related to divorce, child support, custody, etc., the firm name will be the first (or in the top ten) that they will see. The vendor also assures the firm that their efforts will be geo-optimized and directed towards those in the firm’s geographic target area. Given that most internet users will usually not go beyond the initial one or two pages, this sounds like a wonderful way to get a) visibility, b) clicks and c) clients.

But is it really?

The example above fails to address several other variables that would allow for a more considered decision on whether or not to pursue such an effort. First, what is the firm’s organic (i.e., non-sponsored) online positioning? If the firm consistently receives prominent placement on the organic directories, what does an additional pay-per-click effort accomplish? Second, this question becomes even more valid when one considers the enhanced credibility of organic placement versus sponsored placement and the fact that affluent individuals are more likely to seek out those listed in the organic section than they are in the organic.

Third, it is almost certain that the firm will receive clicks off of its PPC campaign. But are they good clicks and at what cost? If they are not good clicks (and by that I refer to those who would never be considered a good prospect for the firm), how much of a financial commitment is being allocated to a program that might better be spent elsewhere. A vendor that emphasizes a single solution cannot answer that question, yet the marketing decision maker at a law firm must be able to do so.

The point here is not to pick on the PPC provider. There are many good reasons to engage in pay-per-click efforts. The same problems hold true for the advertising agency which wants to run an advertising campaign, the PR company promising high visibility, the printer promising to make the firm’s new brochure “pop out,” or even the business “coach” offering to help firm attorneys network and convert sales. We have seen all too often a provider developing a specific element of a marketing program (e.g., an advertising campaign) that is inconsistent with the look, feel and message of the firm as conveyed elsewhere (e.g., through its web site, collateral materials, corporate ID, etc.)

A vendor selling one type of service will, in all likelihood, not know the trade-offs the firm must consider in selecting one route versus another. But here is the important thing.... even if it did, it would be in its own best interests to sell the medium or service it provides. Seems like an obvious concept, but it's one that's often forgotten in a world where the promise of immediacy can cloud good judgment.

Is there is a place for many different vendors in the implementation of an integrated campaign? Of course there is. But someone who understands all of the variables involved must make the decisions related to the full scope of these activities. Failure to do so often results in inefficient and ineffective a la carte programs.

The art of marketing ultimately rests in determining which *mix* of possible permutations will reap the greatest reward.

Les Altenberg is the President of A.L.T. Legal Professionals Marketing Group, which provides integrated marketing services to law firms nationwide. He can be reached at 856-810-0400 or online at laltenberg@LegalProfessionalsMarketing.com.