



MARKETING IS A LEARNED SKILL: HOW DO YOU TEACH IT?

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For decades, firms operated under the misconception that marketing was a skill which one either had, or hadn't. It was thought that either one was a "natural" rainmaker, or one would never become one. As a consequence, decades passed with many a good attorney spending anywhere from seven to ten years dutifully learning and honing their legal skills, only to be unceremoniously cast aside because they never developed marketing skills.

One can understand how this came about. After all, the legal marketplace was in expansion mode for decades. If one did good work, and had a reasonably decent bedside manner, it took little effort to build a modest practice. What held some back?

Not all people are natural entrepreneurs. Not everyone has an ownership mentality. Many attorneys are satisfied with a challenging practice providing a myriad of interesting assignments. For many, the attraction of being a service attorney; being relieved of the need to search for work to fill one's plate, while getting lots of good assignments, was reward enough. In firms of sufficient size which generated work to keep the service attorney busy through to retirement, life was good. The economics worked for all concerned. Profits on service attorneys inured to the benefit of the rainmakers. And retirement came early enough to keep plates filled and profit adequate.

A number of changes have occurred over time which have changed expectations, and largely eliminated the role of service partners. Longer careers have left service partners working longer than the partners who historically fed them work. Rising law firm overhead lowered the profit margin on service partners. As competition increased, many firms were forced to take work from service partners and push it down to a more profitable associate level. Especially if it meant keeping a potential future rainmaker at the firm. So the rules of the game have

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changed. Most firms today expect every attorney to fill their own plate with work, plus some, if they are to become and remain partners.

So let's assume that many of your attorneys are not natural marketers. How do you teach these skills? Start by recognizing that not everything is obvious, and not everyone is comfortable with many of the activities required to successfully build a practice. Add to that a realization that there are many different methodologies which can be successful, so just because you do it one way, it doesn't mean someone else can't do it another way.

Step one requires an approach similar to teaching legal skills. Attorneys learn by doing, as you have all come to know in your careers. Sure, you learn a ton of theory in law school, but you don't really become a skilled lawyer until you begin actually practicing your craft.

If you are mentoring an associate, you begin with simple assignments. You monitor progress. You review quality and progress. You answer questions, and address deficiencies. You provide increasingly complex assignments. You clarify and explain. You show samples of other work product, and help illuminate what defines its excellence. You take the associate to court, closings, and client meetings to observe how to manage situations. You hold the associate accountable to complete assignments well and on time. You increase the workload. You assign increasing responsibility. And you reward progress.

The approach to teach rainmaking, and even good citizenship at the firm, is much the same. For example, networking is a fundamental skill. There is not an attorney who has every built a successful practice without learning to network. One starts with simple "meet and greet" events, learns to interact, build relationships, and ultimately take an active role in the network, which further develops and cements relationships.

Before you send off your young associate to a Bar function, start by understanding that there are no bad networks. Let's also acknowledge that today's young attorneys often value a balance in their life more than dollars in the paycheck. You can't pay them enough to give up their personal life. So they need your help in finding networks which are not just a start in building relationships, but also a good complement to their life. Maybe it's their kid's soccer league, their church or synagogue, or the local neighborhood watch. Don't discourage participation because it isn't the network you'd have chosen. Development of networking skills is what's important. Once developed and part of one's "natural" skill set, it can be deployed in more productive groups.



Probably the most important marketing lesson to learn is how to make it part of your normal workweek. Natural rainmakers manage to build activities into every week without much forethought. That doesn't mean there isn't effort. Learning to market is fundamentally about learning what activities are productive, and learning how to literally budget them into each workweek in a manner that eventually becomes natural. That means that time gets scheduled every week for a lunch, dinner, function, calling or emailing former classmates, colleagues, prospects and so forth.

In the same manner, great ideas become nothing more than daydreams for those without learned discipline. For example, a seminar presentation may initially be something which an associate is invited to participate in, with deadlines and much guidance. However, when the time comes to develop this skill further, it means the associate has to schedule time to 1) identify of an appropriate audience; 2) develop an appropriate topic; 3) network to the point where an opportunity can be secured; 3) set a date and venue; 4) develop the seminar and materials; and most importantly 5) follow up repeatedly after the event to maximize development of new relationships. All of this requires an action plan, and active scheduling on the calendar. If time isn't set aside for each single step, it will never come to pass.

Helping an attorney learn to market isn't all that different than helping an attorney learn to develop technical legal skills. First, the attorney must understand that entrepreneurialism will be required to succeed in today's marketplace. The foundation to success will be found in learning to develop written plans, and making time commitments. You may want to engage a coach or marketing professional to assist in understanding the gamut of activities and their collective role in successfully building a book of business. Plus, in today's marketplace, one must learn how to develop a target-and-pursue laser focus for ones activities.

Keep in mind, if you're not sure where to start, I'm here to help. I also have a number of excellent marketing seminars, and would be happy to present them at your local bar association. Just let your Executive Director know if you're interested.

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