

Turning the Business Model in Your Law Firm Inside Out

Focus on Effective Internal Marketing



By William E. Lowell

My wife will no longer go out to dinner with me. It's not my manners. I just have this theory, if something is not right when I walk into a restaurant—if the hostess is surly, has a bad attitude or the table is unclean—then nine times out of 10 the food will be cold and the service will be bad. Rather than sticking around for the inevitable disappointment, I simply walk right out; and frankly, I'm not shy about telling others to stay away from that establishment.

All the available evidence suggests that most people are like me. They are increasingly demanding and will not tolerate a bad experience, whether they are buying a meal or working with an attorney. That is why it has never been more important for law firms to have an effective Internal Marketing program in place.

Ultimately, Internal Marketing is all about developing "relationship capital." Relationship capital is created when everyone on your team is focused on working together to create a positive brand image and deliver that brand promise to each and every client. If your firm doesn't understand and support the brand message, it is doubtful anyone else will either. "Internal marketing is crucial to employing the full strength of a brand," says Karl James & Company Principal, Karl Robe, APR. "If employee actions are inconsistent with how you position your firm in the marketplace, the brand narrative and power quickly diminish."

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Dr. Silvia Hodges, Ph.D., who teaches law firm management at Fordham Law School in New York and Professional Services Marketing at Emerson College in Boston, believes Internal Marketing is everyone's responsibility. "The most important point is that marketing, human resources and the leadership of the firm all need to work together on Internal Marketing and to drive the efforts," she says. "Marketing cannot do it themselves. The key is to get people wholeheartedly on board. It's all about leadership, the culture and communication efforts," Hodges further states.

Unfortunately, in too many organizations, Internal Marketing is little more than an afterthought. In a recent nationwide survey, only about one in five executives (21 percent) say their marketing and HR departments work together to drive the brand internally and externally.

Effective Internal Marketing prepares your associates, staff and even partners to properly handle every interaction, or "touch point," they might have with existing clients, prospects and recruits. Examples of properly handled touch points include speedily answering telephone calls or e-mails, keeping the firm's Web site up-to-date and maintaining a professional appearance and demeanor at all times, inside the office and in court.

Even your office is a touch point. I recently went to visit a client who runs a very prominent, high-priced law firm in a major metropolitan area. Several pieces of the furniture in the waiting room were threadbare, and I felt like I was sitting in some seedy neighborhood muffler shop. The fact is that the shabby furniture is a reflection on the firm.

The list of touch points is seemingly endless and technology adds new ones nearly every day. Thanks to blogs and texting, for example, your staff members, clients and even summer interns now have a global audience for their thoughts about your practice. Firm leaders need to be aware of these blogs and situations and do their best to ensure the experience the associates are having is a positive one. Attracting the best lawyers can be very competitive. The competition for recruiting someone who has read a comment about a bad experience can hurt your recruiting efforts for years.

According to James V. Etscorn, managing partner of the Orlando office of BakerHostetler, "progressive law firms have marketing managers assigned to help mentor and teach associates about marketing. The key is knowing what the firm has to offer and being aware of all the services as well as discerning the abilities and expertise of the firm's lawyers. Our practice groups teach other practice groups about what we do and how we can help them. It is all about educating the firm's lawyers so they know their colleagues' expertise and can cross-sell that expertise and better assist clients." (See Bluestein article, page 4)

In effect, Internal Marketing turns the traditional business model for law firms and legal services organizations on its head. The goal is to build the brand from the inside out by

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focusing on your staff before your clients. It seems like an odd strategy, perhaps even counterintuitive, but there is plenty of evidence to prove it works. How can you expect an associate to provide a great experience for your clients if they don't have a great experience at work?

There are literally hundreds of Internal Marketing tools and strategies available to help your organization grow and prosper. The first step is to recognize the need and develop a plan to engage all of your employees in promoting a positive

brand image. The really strong firms will invest significantly in Internal Marketing, because they understand the Harvard University study that found that 70 percent of a customer's brand perception is determined by the experiences with the organization's employees. You don't want to lose a client, or potential client, because one of your staff has a bad attitude. ■

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Fresh Perspective

Here are 10 ideas that can help you get started with your own internal marketing efforts:

1. Consider the unique culture of your firm and customize a campaign accordingly. Internal and external marketing campaigns should be designed to reflect your brand, culture and philosophy.
2. Be creative. Allow new people to meet and get to know their co-workers in a relaxed and fun environment. Offer innovative incentives.
3. Keep an eye on Twitter, MySpace and Facebook. Social media can be an effective marketing tool but it can also give disgruntled employees or ex-employees a very large soapbox to trash your firm's image. Let your team know that misuse of the practice name in blogging or texting cannot be tolerated. Encourage associates and staff, who have questions or problems, to come to management first, not the blogosphere. You might even want to consider developing a policy to address the use of social media by your staff.
4. Identify natural internal marketing champions in each practice area or office and work with them to develop their insights. Once trained, they will help drive your brand message internally and externally.
5. Develop an interactive "touch-point" exercise to identify critical client communication opportunities. Where do your associates interact with clients and prospects? In your lobby, sure, but what about the next community picnic? How about while talking to friends and neighbors at a little league hockey game? What are your summer associates saying about your firm to their fellow law students? How about associates on college recruiting trips? Internal Marketing can help you make all those experiences much more rewarding for the client and an opportunity for the practice to build its image.
6. Train your staff to recognize how every touch point is another chance to make a good or bad impression, gain a new client, earn repeat business or generate a referral.
7. Make sure associates and partners understand the influence they have on the brand. Let them know that every time they interact with a client or prospect, they are making or breaking your firm's image.
8. Talk to your staff before you talk to the public. The effect of second-hand news on employee morale can be devastating. Don't let them hear about layoffs or other bad news in the media—keep their trust by being honest and up-front even when the chips are down.
9. Be innovative in collecting the information you need in order to get better at what you do. Consider conducting an employee satisfaction or employee engagement study. The results can drive your entire internal marketing program.
10. Conduct exit interviews with the staff, associates, senior counsel and even partners who leave your organization. Then compile the information into a database, so it can be used to identify potential problems before they become critical. This will help you identify which office is doing well in terms of staff loyalty and which groups or practice leaders are generating the most goodwill.