

Niche Marketing Accentuates Our Exclusivity

by:

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Our target market—high-asset divorce clients—are discriminating and have high-expectations for performance

Marketing a law practice is a chicken-and-egg question. What comes first, selling one's self to clients or developing something worthy of sale? Attracting many clients only to disappoint them is the worst kind of marketing. Since its founding in 1981, Schiller, DuCanto and Fleck has grown to become the nation's largest firm whose practice concentrates exclusively in matrimonial law. In 25 years, the firm has expanded from seven to 37 lawyers. Growth has been slow and steady, resulting from the reputation of the firm rather than any one individual—a unique approach for matrimonial firms.

The founders of the firm wanted to target services to a particular niche: clients with high-asset divorce cases. These clients are discriminating and have high expectations for performance, so the firm needed to attract and train top-quality lawyers who could work with and impress clients and, in turn, promote growth. In developing their vision of how the firm should prosper, the founders sowed the seeds of a marketing philosophy designed not only to attract clients but also to attract, develop, and promote top-quality lawyers.

Servicing every client who came to the firm was physically impossible for name partners, even with help. So growing the firm required the recruitment of excellent lawyers to team-handle cases and assume real responsibilities. One of the means to securing and

developing this legal talent is an in-house law clerking program that emphasizes the need for lawyers to learn well-rounded skills and be exposed to every aspect of a case. Many of these skills are acquired by our student-clerks before graduation from law school.

Recognizing that the best new client promotion is a satisfied client, the firm pays close attention to what pleases or displeases clients. Over the years, we have concentrated our efforts to ensure that all of our lawyers continue to learn and benefit from top-quality legal training. The firm organizes in-house training programs so that younger lawyers have the chance to learn from more senior ones, and we budget for stipends to enable associates to attend seminars, some of which are firm recommended. The second component of training is to help younger members understand how clients want to be treated and the level of responsiveness that is essential to good client relations. The best way to do this is to make younger members part of the team representing the client. This experience provides great role model exposure for handling cases.

Notwithstanding the prominence of our clientele, the firm does not discuss client matters with the press as a marketing vehicle. Although firm members are available to discuss developments in the law, activities of the firm, and the accomplishments of our lawyers, we do not promote ourselves by talking about our clients and their problems.

The firm does advertise, but is selective. We provide to a Chicago-area classical radio station ads that appeal to the clientele we seek

We have found that declining to comment to the press on client matters engenders goodwill among the types of clients we want to attract. (Of course, exceptions exist where statements need to be made with the client's consent.) This approach is consistent with our stated goal of cultivating a niche practice.

»» Costs and client screening

The team approach must be cost-effective for the client. Since inception, the firm has maintained minimum intake standards designed to ensure that clients who engage the firm have enough at stake to benefit from our approach in rendering services.

Periodically we review intake standards and, when necessary, modify them. When we feel that the cost-benefit ratio is not to the client's advantage, we advise the potential client and refer the case to a competent and yet more affordable attorney.

The clients we seek are generally sophisticated consumers of legal services. The team approach delegates legal work at cost-effective levels. Simply because a client has a large estate does not mean that he or she wants a large legal bill to match. A partner's under-

taking of work, at a high hourly rate, that can be accomplished by a paralegal with some instruction and review, wastes the client's money and the senior partner's time and talents. Senior members of the firm supervise younger members, and billing is reviewed to ensure that charges to clients are appropriate to tasks performed. We also pride ourselves on informing clients of any significant steps we intend to take on their behalf before we take them, so that the client can be a real part of the team and cost-benefit analysis. The client should understand what is being done before he or she sees substantial charges for services stated on an invoice.

»» Effort and results

In any firm, members need to see that marketing is rewarded and compensation is commensurate with effort and results. As a firm grows and its members share cases and clients, it is inevitable that referrals will come from sources acquainted with more than one member of the firm. In a large firm environment, it is particularly important to craft a bonus policy that gives junior members an incentive to work on business originated by

senior members and that gives senior members an incentive to significantly involve junior members with important clients and potential referral sources. The firm has worked over the years to institute a business development policy that rewards senior members for promoting and involving more junior members, so that clients can see firsthand the seamless quality of representation at every level within the firm.

In a large firm, each member must understand his or her role in marketing the firm. We market the individual lawyer, the firm, and our excellent service. Younger members are mentored and encouraged to become active in civic and bar organizations to increase visibility in both legal and lay communities. As we have grown, coordinating members' various visibility efforts has been a challenge. Members of the firm are strongly encouraged to write articles and give speeches to showcase our legal expertise. Members who are involved in bar groups are encouraged

Rewards and Incentives

Q: How do you reward marketing efforts by younger firm members?

A: We consider actual clients (the firm accepts) who are brought in by an individual when making final compensation decisions at year end.

Q: How do you induce senior lawyers in the firm to introduce younger members to referral sources?

A: We give a senior lawyer credit for business referred by his or her client or source, regardless of who that source contacts at the firm.

Q: How do you create real incentives for pro bono work and community involvement?

A: We make a minimum number of hours of pro bono work and community involvement mandatory and create a pro bono policy for how the firm accepts pro bono matters.

Q: What additional resources can best assist a firm in matters of marketing?

A: Be aware of what other firms you respect are doing, regardless of their practice area. Think about how and what they are doing and whether it might benefit you.

—D. S. & A. V.

