

MESSAGE FROM THE EDITORS

How-to: Building a Legal Marketing Department

By Steve Conley & Melissa Hoff



He Said

Once, as part of a hiring process, I asked IT candidates to teach our team to build a hamburger. The odd, hands-on exercise was surprisingly effective at identifying candidates with the skills to provide phone support and to teach software classes to a broad client base.

Lately, I've wondered how a similar approach to building a legal-marketing team might look. Here are a few possibilities that hint at skills teams may need or need to refine:

Targeting, Research – Remember the boardwalk or carnival game that used a water pistol to fill a clown's mouth in order to dislodge a ping pong ball? It's all about where you aim—and being prepared to pull the trigger.

Events – Adapted from the real world: Candidates explain how they would handle a video-chat participant who, while on the call, takes his or her tablet device into a bathroom, thus sharing its, er, décor with all.

Sales Support-focused Analysis – A game of Mousetrap helps predict an applicant's likelihood of determining if the firm should try to trap the mouse and if the firm has a reasonable chance and the relationships to do so.

Media/Technology Relations – While traveling to client sites, recruits explain to TSA folks why their government ID and e-ticket don't match. Why? Because good storytelling works, regardless of medium, new or old. Candidates who make the plane get a second interview when they land.

Differentiation – Donning headphones playing ABBA tunes, candidates simultaneously listen to a prospective client describe a company's legal needs—then create a 25-word message to capture those needs. Bonus points awarded to those who bill the client for their analysis and message—after getting the client to confirm they are on track.

Client Care – Go Fish-style questions help determine “where it hurts” before candidates share critical insights with attorney teams playing a high-stakes game of Operation.

Holiday Cards – Prospective team members deliver a watercolor paint tin, Etch A Sketch or iPad to a panel of attorneys, attorneys, then discuss how panelists can create and send their own holiday greeting, sans assistance.

Steve Conley, 303/877-8577, SDConley@Gmail.com.

She Said

When it comes to building a marketing department, most of us don't have the luxury of “having it all.” Particularly given the recent budgetary conservatism as a result of the economic crisis, most of us are operating on a lean staffing model.

In today's world, marketing departments are an eclectic mix in which some members are specialists in specific areas; others focus on geographic regions or offices; and still others support specific practice groups or industries. Regardless of the composition, the need for seamless teamwork departmentally, and collaboration with lawyers and other firm-wide functions is critical. Keeping it all straight can feel like a Herculean effort. Of course smaller firms with smaller departments are often expected to do all of the above with two or three people.

I've learned that when it comes to building a marketing department, personality and social finesse is as important as skill set, and sometimes more so. How can you redirect a project without hurting someone? What's the line between being assertive and combative? Can this person set priorities and boundaries without conveying an I-don't-do-windows attitude? How will this person be perceived in the law firm? Does he or she present an organized, pulled-together image, or does he or she come across as disheveled and scattered? Perception is reality in the law firm and that snap judgments are made, often on limited data.

I've seen a lot of people come and go in this field. My observation is that temperament and social skills have more to do with someone's success and longevity in the field than their skill set. Ultimately, skills and substance count for a lot and the absence of an understanding of marketing principles or strategic thinking will be a hindrance. But those things can be learned. What's harder to learn—or to teach—is the ability to hold your own without steamrolling, to project both confidence and flexibility, and to set priorities and stick to them by being both firm and collaborative.

What I've loved most about the field of law firm marketing is that I see it as the ultimate managerial challenge. How do you persuade people to do something when you don't have a carrot or a stick? When all you have is your credibility and your leadership skills, victories are that much sweeter because people don't have to follow your lead, they do so because they trust you and believe you won't lead them astray.

So give me the right personality any day. The rest will come. ■

Melissa Hoff, 425/522-3010, melissa@mbhstrategies.com