

MESSAGE FROM THE EDITORS

Keep the Dialogue Open



By Melissa Hoff & Steve Conley

She Said

Here's one of the things I love about our industry: I was on an email thread started by Terri Gavulic, who was asking for recommendations on books related to client service. What ensued was a wonderful and impromptu exchange among colleagues and friends. In addition to some wonderful comments and suggestions, there was also some fun banter and a little catching up with old friends.

Here are a few highlights from this exchange; all of them are great recommendations for marketers and lawyers:

- ▶ Ann Lee Gibson's advice for lawyers: Ask your clients questions you don't know the answers to — questions they're a little nervous to ask. Ask clients to explain things about their business, competitors, legal budget, changing needs and how the attorney can add more value to them through the legal work performed. Then, listen to your client and believe what they are telling you.
- ▶ Book recommendations were all over the map — from classics like Harry Beckwith's "Selling the Invisible," to David Maister's "The Trusted Advisor." Other good suggestions included "Setting the Table" and "The Nordstrom Way." For those interested in using social media and the Internet to build relationships and enhance visibility, check out "Trust Agents."
- ▶ If movies are more your speed, Ross Fishman recommends "The Doctor," which provides a great lesson in client empathy when a high-powered physician learns what it's like to be on the patient side of the equation.
- ▶ To quote Jim Durham, "The difference between a good lawyer and a great lawyer is that the great lawyer helps the client: make money, save money, look good and sleep better." Well put.
- ▶ Perhaps the most important advice, and another message to the lawyers from Ann Lee Gibson, "In the next month, leave your frickin' office and go visit, face to face, every one of your most important clients." If we could get them to do that, I think much of the rest would take care of itself.

In addition to some great information, I was reminded of what a tight-knit industry this is and how an email started by an industry veteran led to a wonderful dialogue and idea exchange that felt more like an intimate roundtable than an email thread.

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

He Said

I believe most RFPs for most law firms are a waste of time.

You know some of the standard reasons. RFPs are:

- ▶ time intensive for attorneys, marketing and other professionals;
- ▶ hard to produce, even from boilerplate; and they
- ▶ potentially force firms to offer unprofitable rates, reveal clients, etc.

But the main reason for my harsh assessment of RFPs is responding distracts most firms from exactly what it takes to win them: developing in-depth relationships and knowledge of the very folks looking to hire lawyers.

Even the Association of Corporate Counsel's "Value Challenge," which may have influenced RFP content of late, suggests that "solutions must come from dialog and willingness to change things on both sides."

How much dialog happens during request-for scrambles?

Over my career, I've authored — as a supplier or solicitor of services — several hundred bids. Overall, I have a decent track record as a proposal writer, win-wise, though that's not really my fault.

Why? Because marketing teams I worked with had in-depth knowledge and strong working relationships with most clients to whom we bid our services. Clients' requests for proposal had minimal, if any, impact. So my — our — win rate was a by-product of time spent well in advance of the bid.

Good business development relationships influenced the requests. Maybe specs were skewed our way, maybe timelines favored a marketing team with an already-clear understanding of client needs or maybe a buyer simply liked us, our solution or our price. Maybe we were lucky.

(One 300-page, multimillion dollar winning bid for a prospect we'd spent tons of pre-sale time with was logged in about 28 seconds before deadline, thanks to a slow train.)

Really, any success I've had with RFPs, legal or otherwise, was a combination of all the above: good relationships, good intel, good pricing strategy, a little luck and time well spent, not wasted.

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