



LOOKING BACK TO SEE AHEAD: TRENDS IN LAW FIRM MARKETING

By Terrie Wheeler, MBC

For nearly 30 years, I've worked with attorneys and law firms to help them be more effective at marketing and business development. In some respects, there have been countless changes in three decades. When I started out there weren't websites and getting a new brochure written and printed was a huge and expensive undertaking.

Recently, I sat down with another law marketing pioneer, my colleague Jim Bliwas, to talk about the changes I've seen and what may lie ahead. Jim, a former journalist who's also worked in the field for 30 years, posed the questions to me.

JIM BLIWAS: First of all, congratulations on being honored by the Minnesota Supreme Court for your service to the legal profession as vice chair of the Lawyers' Professional Responsibility Board.

TERRIE WHEELER: Thank you! I was flattered and amazed when I learned I was receiving the award. Serving on the committee has been incredibly rewarding, personally and professionally.

JB: OK, down to business. As one of the first professionals in the field back in the late 1980s, how have you seen law marketing change since then?

TW: Marketing in the early days was very paper-based. The lack of technology limited our efforts to directory listings, printed newsletters, mailed announcements, "tombstone" ads and seminars.

It was like pulling teeth to engage lawyers in marketing. Many thought that because their firm had a marketing person, they didn't need to worry about it. Law firms were 10 years away from developing their first websites. Terms like blogs, SEO and social media didn't even exist. In fact, LinkedIn wasn't launched until 2007. Now, it's more important than traditional directories when a client is considering a lawyer.



JB: In the early days, many partners objected to the whole idea of marketing. Is this still a factor when you work with a firm or with specific attorneys?

TW: Thankfully today, lawyers realize that marketing is really about building strong, genuine relationships with clients and referral sources.

I think most lawyers wish that word of their talent would drive clients to their door. It doesn't. There are so many resources in the marketplace today that lawyers need help figuring out what really works for their unique situation.

JB: Done properly, marketing has been shown to drive serious growth in firms that let their marketing director or CMO do their jobs. Why do you think it has been so difficult for law marketing professionals to be taken more seriously in many firms?

TW: I think it goes directly back to not learning about marketing and business skills in law school. They graduate not knowing about the business of law.

More than 75 percent of lawyers in private practice are in small firms or solo practices. So, many lawyers still think they can do marketing themselves and don't need professional help. That said, the marketing directors and CMOs I know today are highly regarded and well respected in their large firms, developing and guiding the firm's strategic growth. It's the midsized and smaller firms that struggle more with the DIY mentality.

JB: More recently, how would you describe the biggest single change in law marketing over the past, say, five years?

TW: It's bizarre but many lawyers get sucked into long-term search engine optimization and digital marketing contracts

with false promises regarding results. They're told that if they just sign on, clients will seek them out in droves on Google and they won't have to do anything else. Well, that's an appealing idea for most lawyers but it's just not true.

We work with a lot of lawyers and firms on the other side of these contracts, helping them build customized marketing strategies focused on relationship building. Why? Because this is what works. SEO can be useful but by itself is a waste of money.

JB: How has this affected the way lawyers build relationships with current or prospective clients to generate new work?

TW: Smart lawyers realize it's all about building thought leadership and showing clients you actually have done what they need. It is about having a strong niche, a unique brand, and building name recognition around that niche and brand.

JB: A frequent criticism of firms and attorneys is that they do a lot of copycat marketing, doing what a competitor is doing. How can firms and their partners break free of the curse of doing the expected?

TW: By nature, when a lawyer sees another firm doing something different or creative, they jump on the band wagon. It's a lot easier to replicate what other firms are doing using the theory "if that firm felt it was a good marketing investment, it'll be good for us too."

I say do anything *except* what your competitors are doing. Instead, adopt a client-focused approach. For example, one local firm offered to help new businesses create and file their corporate documents for less than \$20. Imagine the good will and loyalty this firm is building by "investing"

in these clients during their early stage of growth.

JB: You and PSM work with a lot of mid-sized and smaller firms that seem to struggle with marketing and business development more than do larger firms. What can a managing partner do to change the culture in their firm?

TW: Well, hire marketing professionals of course! Don't try to do it yourself. Consider hiring a firm like ours and outsource your marketing efforts. We start by developing a marketing strategy before diving into implementation activities.

The reality is that, to sustain profitability you must look at your practice as a business, acknowledging that your role in the business is to build relationships with prospective clients and referral sources. Then, deliver exceptional legal services. Let marketing experts manage everything else for you!

JB: What is the single most important thing lawyers need to know about generating new clients?

TW: They need to grasp the difference between sales and marketing.

Marketing is about messages, sales is about asking great questions. You can't do one without the other. Marketing without a sustained sales effort is too expensive, and trying to attract new business – sales – without any branding or name recognition is just too hard. Growth requires both marketing and sales.

JB: Thanks, Terrie!

TW: Jim, thanks for sitting down with me.



TERRIE WHEELER IS THE PRESIDENT OF PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MARKETING LLC. JIM BLIWAS IS PSM'S SENIOR MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIST.