

Effective Marketing Strategies for the Development of a Successful Law Practice

By Henry J Chang

Introduction

Law schools typically teach law students how to perform legal analysis but really teach them to become successfully established in the practice of law. Those who become successful do so because they have also learned other equally important skills, such as marketing. A discussion of key marketing principles and strategies applicable to legal practitioners appears below.

Identify Your Target Market

For marketing efforts to be the most effective, it is important to consider who the target market should be. For example, if a lawyer's target market primarily consists of immigrants from China, it makes little sense to publish an article in a newspaper read by Latin Americans. Once the target market has been identified, the lawyer can focus his or her marketing efforts on reaching that market most effectively.

In some cases, the group that the lawyer initially identifies as the target market will not be the best choice. For example, the target market may be too small, others lawyers may have already successfully monopolized it, or the lawyer's skills may not be well-suited to serve that target market. The choice of target market should be reviewed periodically and revised based on current conditions.

Differentiate Your Services

There has been a disturbing trend toward commoditizing the practice of immigration law for many years. Perhaps due to the formal recognition of immigration consultants and now paralegals (at least in Ontario) as authorized representatives, many clients now believe that immigration work is not really lawyer work. Based on this mistaken belief, they conclude that the services provided by different immigration practitioners are essentially identical. Based on this mistaken belief, they tend to hire the representative offering them the lowest price.

Several law firms have adapted to this trend and are able to process high volumes of immigration cases at low cost. However, only a small number of immigration law firms have been able to implement such a strategy successfully due to the significant number of paralegals that are required to prepare large numbers of cases. Many immigration lawyers who attempt to compete on the basis of price alone will find it difficult to become profitable because they will be directly competing against law firms that have the capacity to prepare immigration cases at a lower cost.

Lawyers should instead consider their unique strengths and determine what skills they possess that not only make them different from their competitors but make them more desirable to their target market. This could involve speaking the same language as the target market but many competitors who will offer this service also. However, lawyers who develop a reputation for having specialized expertise in a specific area, which is particularly relevant to the target market, will be able to differentiate their services from those of their competitors and charge higher fees.

Promotion Strategies

There are a number of strategies that successful lawyers will typically use to promote their practices. Some of the more useful strategies are discussed below.

Develop your Reputation in the Field

Sometimes a lawyer's reputation as an expert in the field is well-deserved; sometimes it is not. This is to be expected because reputation reflects the perception of someone's skills, rather than his or her true abilities. Despite this fact, there is no doubt that a good reputation is one of the most important assets that a lawyer can possess, so sufficient time should be spent developing it.

When I first began practicing law as a sole practitioner twenty years ago, I had no experience, no reputation, and no clients. So I spent a considerable amount of time trying to establish my reputation as an expert in the field. Although the exact method used will vary depending on the particular lawyer, for me, it involved writing articles relevant to my area of practice.

For lawyers who are not already recognized as experts in the field, publishing scholarly articles is one of the best ways to develop a reputation as an expert in the field. It also helps these lawyers to eventually become experts because relevant legal issues must be properly researched before an article may be written.

Although it may be difficult for a less experienced lawyer to publish an article in a distinguished legal journal, there are still many other opportunities to offer this legal material to the public. For example, lawyers who work at law firms that publish their own firm newsletter should consider writing articles for it. In addition, the proliferation of Internet blogs in recent years has given younger lawyers many new opportunities to guest-post articles on established legal blogs. A lawyer can even create their own legal blog and self-publish this material.

A competent lawyer whose legal articles are widely distributed will eventually become recognized as an expert in the field. Although this can take years, the sooner a lawyer begins to develop his or her reputation in the field, the sooner they will be recognized as experts. Once established as an expert, the lawyer should continue to write articles and speak at conferences whenever possible, in order to maintain his or her reputation as an expert in the field.

Take Advantage of Networking Opportunities

The art of networking is an essential tool in the development of a successful law practice but most lawyers lack the skills that are necessary to implement it. Some useful guidelines for networking appear below:

- a) Take advantage of opportunities to meet new people; this could be at a business networking event or even at a social event. You can try to focus on events that you believe are most likely to develop business for your practice but remember that new business can come from anywhere and will often come from a source that you did not originally anticipate.

- b) Don't avoid events where you do not already know people. In addition, in cases where you already know some of the attendees, do not spend all of your time talking to them. Remember, your objective is to expand your network of contacts.
- c) Be prepared to approach people who you don't know and introduce yourself to them. You can easily introduce yourself to a person standing alone or to the person next to you when you are waiting in line for food or drink. You can also approach small groups even if they are already engaged in a conversation. The fear of stepping outside your comfort zone and meeting new contacts is probably the most common reason why lawyers have trouble with networking.
- d) Remember to exchange business cards soon after you meet someone. When you receive a business card, make that sure you read it before you put it in your pocket. In some Asian cultures, it would be rude to not look at the person's business card before putting it away. However, aside from issues of etiquette, knowing the name of the person's company and the position that they assume will often make it easier to engage in a meaningful discussion with them.
- e) Be inquisitive and genuinely interested in learning about each person. Ask questions about their connection to the event, their company, and their position. Once you identify common interests or past experiences, you can build on this common ground and engage in a meaningful discussion.
- f) Be polite and respectful to everyone. Some networkers are only friendly to people who they think will help them and rude to those who they think will not help them. Since one can never truly predict who will be a good source of business, you could end up alienating someone who might otherwise become a good contact in your network.
- g) Don't engage in dishonest behaviour. Last year, an individual came to our firm to speak about the art of networking. Many of the things he said about the art of networking were accurate but he made one crucial error when he introduced himself to me; he falsely claimed that we had already met at a legal conference that I had recently attended, in an attempt to establish a rapport with me. The individual was a member of the same association and may have even been at the same conference but we had never previously met in person. He assumed that I would not remember everyone that I had met and that I would play along rather than admit that I had forgotten him. This individual even connected with me on LinkedIn prior to his visit to our firm, to reinforce the lie. However, he did not know that I keep a list of contacts on my smartphone, which mentions the event where I met each contact and the year in which it occurred. It did not take long for me to realize that, aside from our connection on LinkedIn, I had no prior contact with him. When I confronted him about it, he continued to maintain that we had met previously. Of course, during his presentation on social networking, he foolishly bragged about using this technique on someone else and his dishonesty was pretty clear to me at that point. After the meeting ended, I emailed several of my partners and told them of this person's dishonesty; I would be surprised if he ever receives a referral from our firm.

- h) Don't make negative comments to people you won't know because it will make a bad first impression. For example, don't complain about the food or how badly the event was organized. More importantly, don't make negative comments about other people who are at the event; it makes people wonder what you will say about them when you move on to the next person. However, sometimes a shared adversity can help you bond with others. When I was attending a reception at a legal conference several years ago in Dubai, I mentioned the difficulties that I had encountered when traveling to the United Arab Emirates. Almost everyone has experienced a travel nightmare at one point or the other; my initial comments prompted further discussion and encouraged them to share their worst travel stories with me as well.
- i) Don't overstay your welcome. As a general rule, you should move on after about five minutes. Exceptions can be made if you are involved in a productive discussion at the time but, if you have established a rapport with someone, it is often better to just follow up with that person later.
- j) Follow up shortly after the event. Most people will exchange business cards but will never follow up with the people that they meet, which this is a mistake. Everyone who received your business card has received cards from many others also and they may not remember you once the event has ended. However, since most people never follow up, if you do so, you are more likely to stand out. In most cases, sending a short follow up email saying that it was a pleasure meeting the person will be sufficient. However, if the number of business cards that you collect is significant, you may find it useful to divide the business cards into two groups:
 - 1) The most significant contacts who will receive a unique, personalized follow-up email from you; and
 - 2) All other contacts who will receive a more generic follow-up email from you.

Some networkers also create a third group consisting of people who they deem unworthy as contacts; the cards in this group are simply thrown away. However, I do not believe that this is a wise networking strategy, since one never knows who will become a good source of business. You could be throwing away the business card of someone who might have been in a position to refer business to you several years from now.

Maintain Regular Contact

Since most people that you meet are unlikely to require your legal services right away, it is important to maintain regular contact. If regular contact is maintained, you will be the first person that your contacts think about when an immigration matter does arise.

In the past, this meant adding a contact your firm's distribution list and sending out legal information on a regular basis, either by mailing a hardcopy newsletter or sending an electronic copy by email. While this strategy still serves a limited purpose, social media is now a much more effective way to achieve the same objective.

The problem with a traditional hardcopy newsletter is that people tend to throw them away without reading them. There is also a high cost involved in printing and mailing the newsletter to a large number of recipients each month.

Electronic newsletters are much cheaper to distribute than hardcopies but people are even more likely to delete them before reading them. In addition, many of your contacts will consider these emails to be spam and will unsubscribe from your email distribution list immediately. If this occurs, you will lose your ability to maintain regular contact with them.

A much less intrusive way to maintain regular contact is to add your new contacts to social media networks such as LinkedIn or, to a lesser extent, Facebook. If you post regular updates relating to your field of expertise, providing links to articles you have written or relevant stories in the news, your contacts will see your name when they log in to those social networks. It will then be up to your contacts to click on the link and read the article or news story. However, this is not necessary to maintain your name recognition, since they will have already seen your name, picture, and received a brief reminder of your area of expertise.

Because social media marketing is less intrusive than emails, a contact who has unsubscribed from your email distribution list will probably still remain connected with you in a social media network. This will allow you to maintain an ongoing relationship with that contact until an appropriate matter arises that requires your particular expertise.

Lunch Meetings

One of my law partners who practices in the field of civil litigation favors lunch meetings over many other forms of promotion. Her attitude is that everyone needs to eat lunch anyway so, if you can turn it into a networking opportunity, why not do so? She also argues that, since you are only committing an hour or so for a lunch meeting, it is less likely to become an awkward, drawn out event.

Although lunch meetings can be very useful as a promotional tool, I tend to believe that they work best for maintaining relationships with existing contacts that are already a source of business. That said, in appropriate cases, a lunch meeting with a new contact can help to strengthen the rapport that has been recently established.

Obviously, you can't extend a lunch invitation to every person that you have met at a networking event. In addition, unless you have established a sufficient rapport with the person you recently met, there is also a good chance that they may not be interested in spending an hour of their time having lunch with you. As a result, you may wish to extend lunch invitations to selected contacts only, and only if you believe that sufficient rapport exists.

Try to Reciprocate

Be Patient

As with anything, don't expect to see immediate benefits from the above marketing activities. Have realistic expectations regarding when you will receive new business from your network. Although some business could materialize immediately, it is not uncommon for two to four years to pass before you see any significant results from the network that you have established. However, the sooner you begin, the sooner that the benefits will manifest.

Conclusion

Clearly, lawyers must be more than just expert legal advisers; they must also be expert marketers. However, spending too much time on one skill area at the expense of the other will often limit a lawyer's prospects; a healthy balance must be struck between the two. Lawyers who earn a well-deserved reputation as an expert in their field and who know how to properly market themselves have the best chance of succeeding in the practice of law.