Marketing for Small Firms and Solo Practitioners

Anyone who manages a law practice worries about attracting and retaining clients. Often times, however, smaller firms and solo practitioners must devote more time and effort to drawing new clients. Because industry recognition and reputation play such huge factors in creating firm awareness, a solid understanding of the major client sources is essential to the growth and sustainability of any small practice. There are five primary means from which firms may acquire new clients. They are:

1. Referrals from existing or previous clients
2. Referrals from friends, family, and other social connections
3. Referrals from other attorneys
4. Referrals from services such as the LRIS and networking groups
5. Advertising

The first source, referrals from existing or previous clients, is often the preferred source of business. To obtain this referral, the client must have been satisfied with your representation to recommend you to someone they know who needs legal advice. When you feel you have established a good working relationship with your existing or previous client, it can be especially advantageous to inform the client about the scope of your or your firm’s services so they can make a recommendation in a different practice area. One great way of making clients aware of other legal services that you or your firm may offer is to send a closing letter informing them of other ways you may be able to help meet their legal needs. For instance, at the end of a divorce case, let the client know that if he or she wishes to have a new will drafted, that your firm can assist with such.

Secondly, referrals from friends, family, and social connections, is a marketing source attorneys often fail to maximize. While our friends, family, neighbors, and other social contacts usually know we practice law, they frequently do not know the extent of our practice areas. When possible, invite these contacts to look at the latest updates to the law firm’s website or to “like” the firm’s Facebook page. Also, when asked a general question about how work is going, try to mention if you have helped on a case for another attorney at the firm in a different practice area to inform these potential referral sources of the firm’s different practice areas.

Next, receiving a referral from another attorney is not only a great marketing source for new clients, but also a wonderful compliment. Before this occurs, however, you have to get to know other attorneys, and in turn, they have to know you and your practice areas. The best way to build relationships with other attorneys in your area is to get active in your local bar association. You can meet other attorneys in your practice area through section memberships. Additionally, by volunteering or attending bar sponsored social events, you have the opportunity to meet attorneys outside your practice area. Of course, if there is a division of a fee between lawyers who are not in the same firm, be certain to read Rule 1.5, Tenn. R. Prof. Conduct.

Additionally, you can obtain referrals by joining networking groups or referral services, such as the Knoxville Bar Association’s Lawyer Referral & Information Service (LRIS). Networking groups have become a tremendously popular marketing source for new clients, especially for those potential clients who do not otherwise know where to look for legal services. Often times, membership in these groups is limited to one person from each profession. This ensures that you receive legal referrals from everyone else in the group, such as a realtor, mortgage broker, investment banker, etc. While getting involved in networking groups often takes some extra time, meeting anywhere from weekly to monthly, getting to know the other group members provides a new source for referrals. The KBA’s LRIS service will also ensure that the referral is pre-screened prior to being referred so you will make contact with a potential client in your particular field of practice. It is important to note that most networking groups have a small fee involved for being part of the group, so make sure that the fee does not violate Rule 7.2, Tenn. R. Prof. Conduct.

Finally, advertising provides a firm with a source of new clients. This, however, is often the most unpredictable and certainly the most costly. For many small firms and solo practitioners, advertising is cost prohibitive. Some of the cost can be alleviated as the preferred method has shifted tremendously over the past ten to fifteen years from the yellow pages in the phone book to internet based advertising. Most firms maintain a website, which is not only an excellent source for new clients, but also a great source for referrals to get information about the firm prior to contacting you. Most internet advertising will direct users to your website, and you will want a way for new clients visiting your site to contact you – this may include a toll-free number, a new client intake form, email links for each attorney or, even the opportunity for users to chat online in real-time. If you do not have the budget for a professional website designer, Google AdWords and other internet based advertising allows you to set limits on monthly expenses for your ad campaign, allowing you flexibility in the amount you want to spend.

As you can see, each marketing source above provides an opportunity for new clients, and the most successful lawyers and firms maximize a combination of each source for a well-rounded group of potential new clients. It is well worth the time and effort to evaluate each category at least once a year to see if you and your firm have maximized the potential for each source of new clients. With proper understanding of these general marketing principles, you or your firm will be better equipped to get and keep that initial clientele base.