

Seven Deadly Marketing Mistakes to Avoid in Your Practice

By Sharon Berman

For many centuries, religious leaders have admonished us to avoid the Seven Deadly Sins, transgressions fatal to spiritual progress. These sins have a counterpart in the professional world – the seven deadly marketing mistakes. Although these transgressions are not associated with specific gruesome punishments in hell, there can be hell to pay in terms of missed opportunities and lost client goodwill. Here are the seven interrelated omissions and commissions that can keep the most worthy practice from thriving.

#1 Looking for the magic marketing bullet. Clients often ask me, “What’s the best way to market?” The answer is that there is no “best way.” The most effective marketing strategy is just the right combination of a variety of elements, such as advertising, public relations, corporate/firm identity, marketing collateral, website and direct mail/email. Since everyone’s time and resources are limited, smart marketing is creating a mix of these components that maximizes return on investment. The “best way” then is to evaluate each of these elements and develop a plan that combines different levels of each to achieve your marketing objective.

#2 Failing to create a marketing culture. Many professional practices, whether standalone or part of a large firm, rely on one key rainmaker. That person is the practice or the firm’s face, and everyone looks to him or her as the marketer. They take it for granted that this individual is in charge of marketing and don’t give any thought to the critical role they themselves play in the effort. For example, the receptionist may not realize that the way he or she answers the phone can make or break the first impression of the firm. Similarly, the person who copies documents for clients may not understand that a client won’t think twice about getting a clean, clear copy, but will definitely notice, and possibly even be irritated if the copy is of poor quality.

Most professionals today think about marketing and many even attend seminars and read books on the subject. But some of that effort may be wasted if others in the office don’t “think marketing.” Usually, the remedy is as simple as explaining to team members that a lot of smaller pieces, e.g., clean copies, can add up to better marketing.

#3 Not creating incentives to market. As a corollary to #2, professionals at the top of the pyramid (e.g., partners, principals, etc.) often express frustration at the challenge of getting associates, or even fellow partners, to go out there and market. A rainmaking partner may complain that he or she is the only one, or one of the few, who are bringing in business. They’ve tried to get others to market, but can’t budget them. The fact is, these rainmakers are “naturals” who just seem to know what to do and how to do it, but they are the exception. The good news is that there are usually others in the firm who genuinely want to market, but just don’t know how. Once they get some skills under their belt, they feel more comfortable and confident venturing forth.

But why should they bother to learn? What’s in it for them, especially if it means giving up some personal time? Let’s face it, if evaluations, salaries and bonuses are based on quality of work and billable hours, there is little incentive to market. The solution is to build marketing into the evaluation and compensation system, so that professionals at every level consider it part of their job, whether or not they are on a partner track. At a minimum, individuals should receive a percentage of the business they bring in. Better yet, create a formal reward for marketing, such as basing a percentage of bonuses on marketing success. Or, allow professionals a certain number of non-billable hours to spend on marketing. Don’t forget to provide support for those who are not “naturals,” for example by bringing in a coach or business development trainer.

#4 Not measuring your marketing. Many aspects of marketing are notoriously difficult to measure, such as your public relations program. But one thing that can be measured is where the potential business comes from. Professional firms generally track where their actual business comes from, e.g., by noting the referral source when they enter a new client into the accounting system. But what about all the other potential clients who called as a result of your marketing efforts? Something you did get the phone to ring, so why not count those successes? Many firms lose valuable information because they don’t track

all of the incoming phone calls or permit leaks to exist. The solution is to assign one individual to collect this information. For example, when someone in the firm fields a call from a prospect, everyone should know that it should go to the “tracker,” so that it can become part of the data collected. Currently, receptionists and others fielding these calls usually don’t know that they should alert anyone about it. As a result, no one is aware of an essential data point in measuring the effectiveness of marketing efforts.

#5 Not taking care of one of your most precious assets – your database. Prospective clients often call wanting to discuss whether or not they should advertise, deliver a seminar or use some other marketing tactic. But when I ask if they have a “clean” and up-to-date database in a contact management system, they tell me that they have not had time to get around to that. They may have contact information in different places, on various lists and in spreadsheets or Word documents, but that information cannot be manipulated as necessary. Aren’t these the people with whom you need to communicate? How are you going to do that?

A clean and up-to-date database is the core of any marketing program. If you cannot drop everything else, make it a “Saturday morning” project. True, it is difficult to fit in during weekdays when phones are ringing and deadlines loom. The solution is to devote one or several Saturday mornings, or other days that work for you, to get it done. It will be well worth the investment of time.

#6 Not focusing on a select few markets or industries. Let’s face it: you can’t be all things to everyone, and even if you can provide service to any kind of company in any industry, you can’t market to them all. The more you can target and narrow your focus, the farther your marketing dollars will go and the more effective they will be.

Professionals are often afraid of excluding potential business when they select a couple of areas with the most potential and clearly state that they will focus on those markets. Ironically, what really happens is the reverse. When you say, “We specialize in the automotive market,” people come up to you and say, “Oh, can you do work for our tractor company, too?” or, “Can you do work for our manufacturing company?” And, just because you specialize in the automotive industry does not mean that you can’t do any other kind of work that comes through the door if it makes sense. You also don’t need to tell every non-automotive client that you specialize in the automotive industry. However, you want to be able to tell prospects in the automotive industry that you specialize in their area.

#7 Marketing ain’t the way it used to be. Marketing today is no longer the dirty word it once was in the professional world. And, gone are the days when you could market through the good work you did, but you couldn’t call it marketing. Today, there are so many more options and ways to put out the word. An underutilized tool, for example, is exhibiting at trade shows. Some professional service firms are venturing out to trade shows, but tremendous opportunity still remains in that area. Finally, if you are still on version 1.0 of your website from years ago, isn’t it time to start developing a new one? Have you explored other on-line marketing options?

The Seven Deadly Sins have a counterpart in the Seven Heavenly Virtues that will bring salvation. In the professional world, these correspond to the seven principles of effective marketing: Create a comprehensive plan that mixes a variety of marketing and public relations elements, foster a marketing culture, develop incentives for marketing, track and measure marketing effectiveness, maintain a clean database, target specific industries and market for the 21st century. And while they may not guarantee eternal heavenly bliss, they will surely lead to your firm’s enlightenment and your clients’ delight. ■

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