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# In a Word

By Sharon Berman

What's in a word? Take, for example, the term "marketing." We all know we should be doing it, and we think we know it when we see it, but just try and define it. Reading marketing textbooks doesn't usually help because the definitions are so convoluted, that they make no sense, and different sources define the concept differently. And when it comes to related terms, such as "advertising" or "public relations," the matter becomes only more perplexing. Again, we know advertising or public relations when we see it, but how exactly are these terms defined? And what is the difference between marketing and advertising, or between marketing and public relations? What's the difference between marketing and sales? Talk about brain-twisters!

One thing is for certain, however. Marketing, no matter how you define it, is critical to your firm's success. But all too often, smart people who want to market are left floundering amid the Babel of all these terms and don't know where to begin. For example, on many occasions, I've met with law firm leadership who want to initiate a marketing program, but are unclear on how to proceed. Sometimes, they have already met with a cable TV advertising rep or a web design firm who is eager to sign them up for an expensive website. Certainly both of these approaches may be components of a marketing program, depending on the nature of your firm, but that's not where marketing starts.

Since marketing textbooks get us nowhere, I'd like to propose my own definition – one that works for professional service firms. Just be aware that a fellow practitioner or academic may define it differently. In the context of a professional service, "marketing" refers to everything you do to get the phone to ring and to generate leads or opportunities to be in front of prospective clients. Once you are in front of them, "selling" begins. I envision marketing as the "red carpet" carpet unfurling and leading you up to the prospective client's threshold.

Whether you are selling a tangible product or a professional service, marketing may be thought of as the rubric. It is the top level, with everything else – advertising, e-marketing, direct mail, etc. – as a subcategory. You can talk about marketing in terms of strategy and positioning, but the bottom line when you market a service is getting the phone to ring with a qualified lead.

How exactly do you accomplish that? First, you need to create "top-of-mind" awareness. This means that when a prospect has a need, you immediately come to mind. Or, when a prospect asks one of your colleagues, "Do you know anyone who...?" you are the first person your colleague thinks of.

Further, prospects are more likely to call you when you have created a "comfort factor." In other words, when the prospect is given your name by a colleague, he or she says, "Oh, yeah, I've heard of him/her," or "I heard him/her speak." On the other hand, if the response is, "Who? I've never heard of that firm," you are less likely to get a call.

When we talk about marketing, we also talk about "positioning." Positioning refers to the position you hold in your target market's mind. Are you a bet-the-company law firm, an ambulance chasing one, or, most likely, somewhere in between? Defining and claiming your positioning increases the potential for getting the right kind of clients to call.

Creating top-of-mind awareness and reinforcing your positioning requires that you stay in front of your targets on a steady basis, because you never know when they will have a need. Prospects are most likely to remember you when you

have met them face-to-face, but you can only meet so many people, and we all remember the last person who walked out of our office. That's where marketing tactics, such as direct mail and email, come in to supplement your in-person meetings.

There is a whole array of marketing tactics from which to choose. Think of them as the "hands-on" elements of your marketing program. They include: advertising, public relations, firm identity, direct mail/email, networking, marketing collateral, merchandising (for example, your lawyers' appearance and that of the office), on-line marketing, and many others. Since time and money are always limited, carefully evaluate the pros and cons of available tactics as you develop your program. Your goal is to select your "marketing mix," the combination of tactics that you believe will maximize the return from your marketing investment.

One component no marketing mix should be without is public relations. The term "public relations" refers to the fact that you are targeting different "publics," such as your lawyers, clients, referral sources, prospective clients and influencers. Public relations is often called "free advertising"; however, except for the fact that you don't pay a media outlet to spread your message in the marketplace, there is nothing free about it. If you have done it, you know it can be a lot of work. Public relations may be further broken down into media relations (e.g., to position your attorneys as expert spokespeople), public speaking, sponsorships and seminars.

As you consider public relations versus advertising, consider their key differences in terms of payment and control. With advertising, it's straightforward – you pay to place an ad and you control the message with the ad's text. You can choose what to say, and where and when to say it. The drawback is the element of skepticism. Since the statement is coming from you, how do prospects know that it is true? PR, particularly in the form of media relations, on the other hand, carries with it the power of a third-party endorsement. For example, if you are quoted in the LA Times, readers assume you must know what you are talking about. This type of editorial publicity amounts to an endorsement of your credibility.

However, the main drawback of media relations is that after you have been interviewed, made a statement or distributed a press release, you have no control over how it is communicated. That's why you occasionally hear complaints from professionals that they were misquoted or quoted out of context, or that they are unhappy because their article appeared under a different headline than that originally proposed.

There is much more to the alphabet soup of marketing and the various tactics that interrelate to form a comprehensive marketing strategy. But once you understand the basic definitions, it becomes easier to see how the pieces fit together. It's a good starting point as you assemble the puzzle of an effective marketing effort. ■



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