Time to Change: A Primer on Adapting to Today’s Legal Marketing Trends

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Change is already taking place, with or without you. But there is no reason to panic! All you need to do is keep calm, embrace it, and join the success of those lawyers, legal marketers and law firm leaders who have seen the light and let change improve their marketing, business development and branding activities.

Unfortunately, that sounds a lot easier than it is for most law firms. For many senior attorneys, the idea of change is simply ridiculous: “Why bother? I have been successful doing it my way for 40 years, and I am not going to approve spending more money on these new high-tech forms of communication that are designed for the consumer market, not the services industry!” I think this resistance is nothing more than an attitude problem, led by fear of the unknown and unwillingness to accept that a new generation is demanding new ways of doing business.

To help in this effort, let’s look at some of the most significant legal marketing tactics, tools and trends that law firm leaders and marketing professionals should consider incorporating into their own practices.

Encourage Leadership to Think Differently

Lawyers being lawyers – i.e., resistance to change, risk aversion and love of autonomy – is the biggest impediment to change. — John Remsen, Jr., founder of TheRemsenGroup

Legal marketers place a lot of pressure on themselves to implement communication best practices, but without the support of the firm’s management to enforce these new tactics, success is next to impossible. Change has to start at the top. Lawyers are too comfortable with tradition, so firm leaders have to show by example that the waters are fine and everyone should take a dip.

Managing partners who are looking to inspire change within their firms must first understand the importance of outlining a plan for change and then articulating the plan with clear, actionable and accountable steps so everyone is on board with the initiative before it is implemented. Or, as John Remsen puts it: “Managing partners have to run the place more like a business and less like a loose confederation of sole practitioners.”

One way managing partners can adapt to changes more effectively is to create a change committee. The committee should include management, marketing, business development, IT and attorneys from each of the generational sectors. The committee’s job is to be the firm’s change agents and trendsetters, ensuring the firm’s operations are kept up to date. It is the committee’s job to recognize changes that would improve and enhance the firm’s brand equity, client relations and competitive tactics.

Audit Your Current Practices

Do an audit of your current branding, marketing and client relations activities and compare against today’s communications best practices, tools and tactics. This will reveal the gaps in your current activities so you can
better identify where to increase budget dollars and where you can save them. Make sure not to go into an audit blindly. Define the methods of measurement and the goals so everyone is on board and marching to the same tune.

**Implement New Technologies**

Technology obviously is where we have seen the most changes in law firm marketing. It affects the way we communicate internally and externally; market and sell our services; share our stories; and connect and listen to our audiences. It also dictates the way we measure the success rate of our marketing programs. Technology is the key to being a more efficient marketing powerhouse and allowing us to do more with less. In many cases, it’s free; you just need to invest a little people power and strategic thinking.

New technologies are being introduced that will play a critical role in marketing and branding, including:

- Wearable technology, like the Apple Watch, will require us to reconsider the ways we produce and share our stories.

- Augmented reality could become a major game-changer for trial lawyers.

- Facial-recognition technology will add an entirely new element of personalization to marketing campaigns, enabling us to engage with our audiences in ways that are more meaningful and personal than ever before.

- Gamification is a relatively new strategy – one that often incorporates technology – that is interesting because of the way it can inspire action through friendly competition and build a sense of community.

**Update Your Website**

Changes in website development and design are another critical area to stay on top of. A website strategy and design developed as recently as three years ago is probably already outdated. For example, mobile is number one when it comes to website trends. The demands associated with having a mobile site mean changing the way you organize and present your brand and brand messaging. How do we cater to the need to be accessible 24/7 from the palms of our audiences’ hands while providing the high-level resources and content that they have come to expect – and even demand?

**Review Your Content Strategy**

Organic search engine optimization (SEO), content marketing and data analytics have become big game-changers, especially in the digital and website marketing worlds. Your communication and branding strategies must include quality content and storytelling. These changes have obliterated the lines between marketing and PR. And it is here that I see the greatest need for law firms to change their communication priorities.

Now more than ever, law firms have to consider a more rounded content strategy – one that includes paid, earned, shared and owned media, as well as an eye toward messaging that builds brand awareness and customer loyalty.

Another change affecting the effective use of content can be summed up by the adage “less is more.” In other words, the different delivery platforms and the deluge of content from a seemingly infinite number of sources require us to create stories and headlines that are more creative and provocative than ever before. This need to write for the medium, though, doesn’t detract from the importance of prioritizing quality over quantity.

Another big change – one that law firms are slow to incorporate – is the need to be more transparent with your communications, specifically in a way that emphasizes a more personal, human side. This can be achieved through good storytelling, which will allow you and your attorneys to connect to people on an emotional level to inspire, motivate and persuade your audience to be brand advocates.

Content strategy should always be in a state of flux. We can now use data analytics to inform how we revamp our content in real-time to improve marketing, advertising, branding and PR activities. If this seems like a lot to take on, it might be time to restructure and change your marketing and PR team to include a content manager and SEO specialist.
**Stay on Top of Social Media**

Yes, social media is noisy and crowded, but, if used strategically and creatively, you will reach a much greater audience with it than through any other form of marketing. Besides, not being active in the social realm can lead to missing out on huge opportunities. In a survey Jaffe conducted in 2014 with the Remsen Group, we asked managing partners about their use of LinkedIn. Though we were pleased to find out the majority of them do have LinkedIn profiles, many said they failed to see any value in social media engagements. What they don’t understand is that they are missing out on opportunities to shape their reputations, bring attention to the firm’s brand and connect with in-house counsel, who statistically do use and see value in LinkedIn.

While it’s hard to talk about other social channels when law firms are ignoring the usual suspects like Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook, we need to change the way we think about these tools and creatively find ways to use them. For example, Microsoft, IBM, FedEx and other organizations are now using Instagram – the photo-sharing site whose user base has exploded – to reach their corporate customers.

Social media is also the new advertising, just with more flexibility and fewer costs. We still need ad dollars in our budgets, but they won’t be allocated for print publications. Social advertising as part of a fully rounded communications campaign works very well. For example, LinkedIn ads are more expensive than other network ads, but they work better because of the nature of the network. You might pay $7 a click, but they are quality clicks.

**Integrate PR and Marketing**

Understand not simply the practices for which you are responsible but the entire platform. This is what makes rainmakers and allows you to more holistically advise your constituencies. — Timothy J. H. Delaney, Chief Marketing and Business Development Officer at Ballard Spahr LLP

As marketing leaders, we need to stop compartmentalizing our marketing and PR efforts and start thinking comprehensively about how best to integrate them over multiple channels. The lines are blurred between all communication tactics. Traditional marketing and PR strategies are declining, and the emergence of native advertising and content marketing is taking center stage.

Legal marketing is undoubtedly becoming content-driven, but, if your marketing and PR activities are not in line with one another, then content opportunities will be overlooked.

A new trend that has arisen in the marketing agency industry is the “team first” approach. This team approach is where PR, marketing, content and social all have equal say over one unified goal: to create and share the best content possible. By integrating communication programs, you can create more effective content and distribution strategies.

No longer can law firm leaders and marketers focus on one tactic at a time. Legal marketing and PR must become centralized, working as a team to achieve the firm’s goals. As Chief Marketing Officer of Freeborn & Peters LLP, Ian H. Turvill, says, “PR activities at our firm are informed directly by the messaging developed by our marketing department. At the root of all our efforts is our definitive culture, which informs our unique brand.”

**Understand that Change Is Good**

The landscape of legal marketing has changed, and it won’t go back to tradition. Whether through social media, content marketing, video or infographics, firms that take the lead in using such untapped resources properly will become the trendsetters that other law firms will have to follow. I’m not asking you to make changes for the sake of change itself. I am asking that you recognize that implementing the right changes can and will improve brand awareness, brand equity and operational efficiencies.

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