

THE NATIONAL LAW REVIEW

How to Become Subject Matter Expert

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In a December 2016 article forecasting the top 10 business trends that will drive success in 2017, Forbes' predicted the number one trend to be subject matter experts (SMEs). This is good news for lawyers, some of whom have been employing this tactic for business development for decades.

For those unfamiliar with the term, an SME is someone who has niche knowledge of a particular area. The thinking is that this expertise serves as a key differentiator and thus, if promoted effectively, can be an incredibly potent business development tool. Just look at technical experts, such as software engineers, scientific researchers and process engineers. These professionals typically are not taught marketing skills in their formal education and may even have a disdain for the sales process. Yet, their level of knowledge can be a real sales differentiator for the organizations in which they work.

The same is true for attorneys, and while the legal industry may not have embraced the terminology, one could argue that attorneys were the original SMEs. Many of those who are successful rainmakers are not generalists; they have developed a well-defined, narrowly-focused practice niche.

This article will explore some ways in which attorneys can capitalize on this projected trend and position themselves as SMEs.

Why Position Yourself as an SME?

Clients expect their attorneys to have the experience to handle their matter, but they are willing to pay a premium for those recognized as the best. In the more than two decades that I have worked with law firms, I have interviewed 100s of law firm clients who consistently say that they (1) hire lawyers, not law firms and (2) hire attorneys who are authorities in a practice niche, are experts at solving a particular business problem and/or have in-depth knowledge in a certain industry.

SMEs, over the course of developing their expert statuses, have the opportunity to develop the reputation that place them top of mind with buyers. SMEs are typically more sought after because people want to feel that they are being helped by someone who really knows what they are doing and has a deep understanding of the problem. It is reassuring to trust that you are doing business with someone who has real knowledge of a specific industry, area, process or all of the above.

Narrow Your Focus

For some attorneys, the law firms they join following law school dictate the service area in which they will practice. For others, there is the option of selecting a practice focus. Either way, in order to become a SME, attorneys should start to develop knowledge and experience in a subject matter area as early as possible.

For example, you may be practicing in the general commercial litigation practice at your firm, but that does not preclude you from developing a special focus. Make it known that you are interested in cases that involve certain types of disputes or ask to be a part of the team working with clients in a particular industry. Over time, as you



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continue to get more experience with a certain type of business issue or within a particular industry, you will accumulate knowledge specific to that area.

Build Your Credentials

Take advantage of any specialized certification, ranking or education that will position you as an “expert” to prospective clients. Become certified in the practice area in which you are focusing, if the state bar offers such a program. Ask your clients what certifications, rankings or special designations are available in their industries.

For example, if you have chosen to narrow your litigation practice to financial services disputes, obtain the same credentials as your clients and prospective clients by becoming a Certified Mortgage Banker. If the better known legal rankings (Chambers, Best Lawyers) do not rank attorneys within your area of focus, look for rankings outside of the legal industry.

Market Yourself as a SME

It is always best to approach your marketing activities by way of a strategic plan. Marketing yourself within the area for which you are building your SME credentials provides an automatic strategic framework for your marketing activities. A few examples include:

- Develop a blog specific to the subject matter area or industry.
- Monitor information about and network at meetings of the industry groups. Volunteer to give presentations to the group, as well.
- Start a podcast dealing with trends and news in the subject matter area.
- Identify the reporters who write about the subject matter or within the industry. Send them information that breaks down difficult topics, offer perspective on trends or provide them background information and quotes.
- Support your SME activities through social media. Post your SME activities on LinkedIn and Twitter. Follow influencers and leaders on their social media channels. Use hashtags that associate you with the subject matter.
- Prepare a version of your bio specific to the area of focus. Use this bio for speaking engagements and follow-up for networking events.

You’ve Got This!

Lawyers who struggle to embrace the marketing aspect of the legal profession may benefit from approaching marketing as a part of building one’s reputation and profile as a SME. After all, being a SME is inherent in practicing law, so the process of establishing oneself as a SME should provide a more comfortable roadmap for legal marketing than other approaches.

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