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## See through the downturn

By David T. Brown

When the economy began its downward spiral a couple of years ago, many law firms retreated from their marketing and business-development activities in an effort to tighten purse strings and operate as leanly as possible. But this “hunker-down” mentality proved to be shortsighted.

In contrast, firms with longer-term views have seized upon the downturn as an opportunity, actively working to grow their client bases, their attorney ranks and even their profitability while competitors have fallen behind.

What follows are several marketing and business-development strategies that have helped resourceful firms achieve success amidst one of the toughest economic periods in our nation’s history — strategies that can serve all of us well going forward.

Before even thinking about creating business opportunities in a down market, it is important to address a key point of connection between firms and their prospective clients: overall positioning and related marketing messages.

Start by revisiting your messaging to make sure it has evolved to reflect current-day client demands. Are clients’ needs and expectations the same as they were two years ago? Has your firm begun to offer additional services — or alternative billing arrangements — to reflect the changing times? What new strengths have emerged within the firm that could help clients succeed despite the economic downturn?

At no other time in recent history has it been so important to ensure that you communicate messages that really matter to existing and prospective clients. A complete overhaul of your marketing strategy may not be necessary, but firms should strive to clearly illustrate that they care deeply about the issues their clients are facing. They should also demonstrate that they have adapted to address those concerns over the last couple of years. Just as client needs have evolved, so should an astute law firm’s positioning and messaging.

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Next comes the development of a strategic approach to generating new business. Start by concentrating on a few key areas: 1) give

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attorneys new tools to help them enhance their business-development skills; 2) make an increased effort to meet face-to-face with existing clients; and 3) identify new cross-selling opportunities that address changing client needs while also benefiting the firm.

In an effort to jump-start this process, some firms have hired professional practice-development coaches to help fine-tune their attorneys’ marketing skills and motivate them to succeed. While this can be a productive option, there are some key considerations to keep in mind before going this route:

- Choose attorneys who embrace the concept of marketing and business development. Of course, clients always come first, so identify those candidates who are willing to devote extra time and energy to bringing in new business, even if they have a full client load.
- Require participating attorneys to have some “skin in the game.” If the attorneys invest their own financial resources in the coaching process, they are more likely to be fully engaged in the sessions and eager to generate results.

Attorneys who do not make a personal financial commitment may not take full advantage of the opportunity. A group of Much Shelist attorneys who recently worked with a business development coach shared the cost of the training program and saw a portion of their contributions returned to them when their outcomes were successful.

- Provide participants with the discipline and tools to change old habits and form new ones that can benefit both the attorneys and the firm. Attorneys tend to focus on the billable hour. And while that’s certainly impor-

tant for the success of the firm, a coaching program can help them modify their behavior to include business development as a part of their weekly routine.

- Hold attorneys accountable for their actions. If participants are required to report efforts and outcomes to the coach and the firm, they are much less likely to stray from the path.

- Encourage participants to share tangible ideas that their colleagues can also use to be more successful at bringing business to the firm.

While it may not be practical to implement this type of one-on-one business-development coaching firmwide, all of your attorneys can nurture their existing client relationships with a high-touch approach that engenders client loyalty. Here are some examples:

- Regularly initiate face-to-face conversations — even off the clock — with clients about the legal, business and economic issues affecting them. The most successful attorneys take the time to show their clients that they are truly invested in the relationship by engaging in personal visits. This approach will help you understand almost every aspect of your clients’ businesses and industries, which in turn will make your clients more inclined to give you additional work.

- Always ask for feedback. Learning what clients think about your firm’s performance nourishes growth and professional development for individual attorneys, while at the same time demonstrating a strong client focus.

• The minimum is never acceptable. Always strive to exceed clients’ expectations, whether it involves off-the-clock counsel, insightful business advice or a personal visit.

- Be responsive to clients’ needs. An attorney who returns calls and e-mails in a timely manner communicates to clients that their questions and concerns are a top priority. Much Shelist learned through a recent research effort that responsiveness is a primary driver of client satisfaction — and an area where many firms fall short.

- Never underestimate the power of saying “thank you.” A brief, personalized note of gratitude to a client reiterates how much you value the relationship.

These and other efforts to cement existing relationships can go a long way toward engen-

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dering client loyalty. At the same time, however, there is another important business-development strategy that remains underutilized at many law firms — identifying new cross-selling opportunities.

It is well understood among law firms that targeting existing clients is one of the most successful ways to bring in new business.

If a client already feels confident and comfortable with certain attorneys at your firm, then engaging another practice area — one that goes beyond the core relationship attorney — can be a natural progression. As a result, you should always look for opportunities to introduce your clients to colleagues who might be able to meet new or specialized needs.

But cross-selling is not only about making introductions; it's also about listening,

continually learning more about clients' needs and identifying new areas that could require attention. In addition, it's about ensuring that your clients truly connect with — and have confidence in — other attorneys within your firm.

Unfortunately, firms seem to have a tough time effectively cross-selling their capabilities. Why is it so hard?

Maybe it's the desire to completely control the relationship, a lack of confidence in your partners' service level, or perhaps economic considerations. But in the end, the client's interests should always come first. It's that simple.

If a firm can deliver great service to an existing client in other areas of law, it should. It's the responsibility of the firm's leadership to resolve any issues quickly and efficiently

before additional business opportunities are lost. Again, the client's best interests should be served above all else.

To some, it may seem counterintuitive to devote significant time and financial resources to marketing and business development activities during an economic downturn. But forward-thinking firms saw through that shortsighted assumption and implemented winning strategies that have enabled them to create new opportunities in a difficult marketplace.

By encouraging their attorneys to enhance their business development skills, foster loyalty by spending more time with clients, and identifying and acting on cross-selling opportunities, these firms have been able to sustain themselves and even rise above the economic downturn while many of their competitors have fallen behind.