

Three Steps to Stronger Relationships



By Mary K Young

Building relationships takes on added importance in a difficult environment. As the economy slowly climbs out of the recession, it has become more important than ever for lawyers to reach out and make personal connections with their clients, each other and law firm staff. Lawyers who have focused on building and expanding relationships during the recession will find that their practices grow more rapidly as the economy improves. And legal marketers can help by offering training and support to their lawyers to help develop and expand their connections.

1. Build Your Relationships

This is not the time to cut back on your budget for activities that allow you to interact with clients. If anything, your lawyers should be doing more client entertainment and educational activities. Clients will appreciate free CLE programs, alerts, seminars and Webinars more than ever as long as they are timely and relevant to their business. This is the perfect time for associates and young partners, many of whom will have available time, to become engaged and educated in client development.

This is the perfect time for associates and young partners, many of whom will have available time, to become engaged and educated in client development.

Legal marketers can be catalysts for deepening client relationships by helping their lawyers develop a plan for each important client. Ideally, this exercise will be conducted as part of a key client program and it will coincide with the firm's annual planning and budgeting process. But developing a plan for staying close to the client can be done at any time.

Legal marketers can lead the process by developing a strong understanding of what has been done with the client in the past. In addition, they can conduct research into the client's business situation and the nature of the firm's relationship with the client. Armed with this information, marketing can work with key relationship partners to develop a plan that addresses which activities should be kept and which should be added.

The lawyers should then take the crucial step of meeting with the client to discuss the client's needs and refine the plan.

Finally, marketing and the relationship partners should finalize the plan and develop a budget to support it. As the plan is developed, keep in mind associates and young partners, who may be able to find roles such as developing the curriculum for a CLE program, writing alerts or meeting with more junior members of the client's team.

2. Convey a Sense of Urgency and Empathy

Your clients are engaged in rethinking everything from their departmental structure to their companies' long-term business models. Their needs are urgent, and it is essential to respond with concern and urgency. The natural tendency of lawyers is to proceed cautiously and avoid risk. When rendering legal advice, urge your lawyers to dispense with the usual caveats and do the best job possible with the information available. This is not the time to let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

In addition, many corporate legal departments have had budgets and headcounts slashed in the last year. It is in everyone's interest to help clients cope with lower budgets and to help laid-off lawyers find new jobs. In addition to the psychic rewards, relationships will be enhanced and, eventually, law firms that assist may be on the receiving end of new business from grateful lawyers who land new in-house positions.

To help lawyers stay aware of their clients' needs, legal marketers can help articulate the voice of the client. LMA and other professional development organizations frequently conduct meetings with corporate lawyers or publish interviews with in-house counsel. At one of those sessions, the general counsel of a very large financial institution explained that his legal budget had been cut by 50 percent. In addition, he was spending many hours each week counseling lawyers he had laid off. He was looking to his law firms to understand his situation, help him find ways to do more with less and aid his former colleagues in their job searches. Legal marketers can help their lawyers understand what is on the minds of their clients by taking every opportunity to listen to the clients talk about their needs. In addition, client-service-interview programs, led by the marketing department, are a great way to find out what is keeping clients up at night, as well as to measure the quality of service delivery.

3. Court Your Team

Corporate clients are very concerned about turnover among lawyers who work on their matters. The issue was articulated

Continued on page 19

Three Steps to Stronger Relationships

Continued from page 12

well by the head of litigation for a Fortune 100 company that spends more than \$100 million a year on litigation alone. He said that he views his law firm relationships as an investment because of the large amount of time he devotes to helping his law firms understand his company, his matters and his company's processes for litigation. He views turnover within a law firm's team assigned to his matters as a waste of his investment.

Although turnover among lawyers who have not been laid off is down, this trend may be short-lived as the economy recovers. To help prevent future turnover, this is a great time for firms to reach out to promising associates and young partners to reassure them about their future with the firm and to focus on their development. Marketing can play a role in helping lawyers do this by improving internal communications, helping to design business development training programs, working on individual business development plans for senior

associates and young partners and identifying business development activities to which associates and junior partners can contribute. This is a form of investment in talent that will pay dividends as firms return to higher levels of utilization.

This is the heart of the matter: You must work relentlessly to add value for your clients, particularly in these economic times. In countless discussions with in-house lawyers, we hear that, at the end of the day, the value they get from their law firms is far more important than the price. Legal marketers can play a critical role in getting that message across and give lawyers tools to help them develop stronger relationships and deliver higher value. ■

Mary K Young is a partner at the legal consulting firm Zeughauser Group, with a focus on strategic planning, branding and positioning and marketing planning. She served as the chief marketing officer of Howrey from 2000 to 2006.