



ENGAGING LAWYERS IN A PROFITABLE SPEAKING INITIATIVE

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While most legal marketing professionals are convinced that content marketing is an essential element of a comprehensive business development plan, they often have difficulty motivating attorneys to participate fully. In my recent article “Thought Leadership Initiative: A Road Map for Law Firms,” published in the March 2016 issue of *Marketing the Law Firm*, I outlined steps that can be taken to begin or revitalize a law firm’s content marketing program.

The focus of this article is on the public speaking aspect of the initiative. My intent is to provide suggestions that readers can share with motivated attorney presenters who wish to improve results from speaking efforts.

Actively Seek Speaking Opportunities

Delivery of a quality presentation requires hours and hours of preparation time. Despite this significant investment of time, many lawyers give the speech one time or perhaps update it on an annual basis for a “year in review” type CLE. Why not leverage the intellectual capital and share the message with many?

My recommendation is to create a professional proposal containing descriptions of at least three different topics in which the attorney has or wishes to develop expertise, customizing for relevance to the targeted audience. For example, proposals submitted to a bar association by an estate planning attorney should be tweaked when forwarded to associations serving accountants or financial planners. It is helpful to enclose copies of published written materials demonstrating the lawyer’s expertise on the topic as well as a brief biography and testimonials. If you would like to review a sample proposal, please e-mail me at the address listed above.

When researching organizations on behalf of attorneys, it is helpful to create an excel sheet to monitor and record progress. Be sure to capture the names and contact information of program planners on staff and of volunteers responsible for programming so that relationships can be developed. In customizing the cover letters, point out how the session offered by your attorney will benefit the members and how the topic complements past programming trends.

The most important advice that I can offer on this or any other business development endeavor is to be persistent and follow up consistently. Let me relate a brief personal story to illustrate the point. During 25 years spent as an estates/elder law practitioner, I built a strong brand primarily through publishing articles and lecturing attorneys, accountants, and financial planners, as well as select public groups. Although my strategy was to focus on local organizations, I did not normally seek national speaking engagements. However, in 2007 I was invited to submit a proposal to offer a breakout session at the Million Dollar Round Table annual meeting, which attracts approximately 9,000 attendees. Admittedly, my ego was bruised after reading the terse rejection e-mail. In 2008 I took a different approach by calling the person in charge of the estate planning portion of the event, asking him why my proposal was rejected the previous year and how the proposal could be redrafted to be more attractive to the program planners. His response was, "Send the e-mail directly to me and I'll make sure you are a featured speaker. Anyone who cares enough to make a call like this deserves it." The presentation was a dream come true. I established a number of new referral sources as local professionals who heard me speak (or even knew that I spoke) at an international convention saw me in a new and brighter light.

Create Speaking Opportunities

It is increasingly common for law firms to sponsor and produce both live and virtual events as part of a business development strategy. Even a small conference room can accommodate five or six professionals for a "Lunch and Learn" event. Firms that have their own virtual platform can easily update clients and prospects with respect to current legal developments. Imagine holding a series of complimentary sessions in which clients are invited to participate and bring a friend.

In order to attract professionals to events, become an accredited provider of continuing education credits. While professionals are hungry for knowledge, most are more likely to attend a course if the content qualifies for CE credits. For example, my firm was accredited to issue credits to CPAs and CFPs and our quarterly sessions routinely attracted 35 attendees. Although the standards for becoming an accredited provider are straightforward, the process can be a bit time consuming, which is the major obstacle for most.

Another way to attract attendees is to find a co-partner who represents the same marketplace as your firm. Create a joint seminar that is marketed to both of your databases, thus increasing exposure for each of you.

Improve Platform Skills

Firm attorneys willing to make simple shifts such as those described in this section will ultimately improve their professional presentations and thereby enhance their personal brand.

Budget time so as to arrive early and leave late. Because lawyers are typically stretched thin, they often arrive at a speaking venue with only a few moments to spare before “showtime” and then careen out of the room immediately upon completing the presentation. This defeats one of the objectives of delivering the speech, which is to create and deepen relationships with audience members.

Practice the speech to make sure that prepared remarks fit within the scheduled time frame. Planning ahead will prevent the frustrating situation of being able to cover only a portion of the material because of misallocation of time. I normally prepare a brief timed schedule for the speech that is placed on the podium or lectern for my easy access.

Learn to become comfortable interacting with your audience members. Comments from others during the course of a presentation breaks up the monotony of hearing one person speak for an hour. Also, others may add valuable perspectives to the topics at hand.

Strategy for engaging audience. Because I make it a practice of remembering a few names, I can engage as follows: “Larry and I were chatting before we began today’s session and he related a unique way that his firm conducts memorable real estate settlements. Larry, do you mind telling everyone about your process”? Naturally, I would have his permission before beginning this line of conversation. After he tells his story, I then ask if other attendees have something to share, and many will jump on the bandwagon since another person “went first.”

Audience Engagement: Final Opportunity

Most speakers make little effort to create or deepen relationship with attendees beyond offering to distribute business cards or brochures (which may or may not end up in the nearest waste basket). The following suggestions are designed to elicit contact information from audience members. Which ones would attorneys in your firm be willing to implement?

1. Encourage the attendees to connect on social media while displaying a slide with icons of the lawyer’s preferred platforms (e.g., LinkedIn, Twitter).
2. Extend an invitation to sign up for the firm’s newsletter by leaving business cards with the speaker or by sending an e-mail.
3. Offer to send an article, checklist, or other valuable content on request.
4. Mention future live or virtual educational sessions in which the attorney is a featured expert.
5. Ask attendees to complete an evaluation form.

The names and contact information captured by any of the above methods should be entered immediately into your client relationship management system. A quick follow-up after the session is a step toward building or deepening a relationship with a client or referral source. Consistent and persistent contact with many people will help build profitable relationships with some of them.

The Wrap-Up

Legal marketing professionals can assist the attorney speakers with follow-up tasks that may otherwise fall by the wayside despite the best of intentions.

- Send thank-you notes to the program planner and staff who were helpful. A handwritten note is preferable as it conveys a personal touch. Mark the calendar to send a proposal at an appropriate time for another presentation, and find out whether the organization has a blog, newsletter, or other periodical that would accept a short article from the lawyer.
- Review the evaluation sheets carefully as the comments will provide a basis for improving the presentation. If the person has asked for a follow-up, remind the lawyer. It is not unusual for an attendee to inquire regarding the attorney's availability to speak for another organization. Depending on the circumstance, it could be appropriate for the marketing professional to make the initial contact.

Conclusion

People do business with professionals they know, like, and trust. A strategic speaking initiative is an effective way to reach potential clients and referral sources as it showcases the attorney's expertise and thereby strengthens the personal professional brand. All the suggestions made throughout this article can be implemented immediately by any lawyer looking for a long-term practice-building solution.