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GAIN COMPETITIVE
ADVANTAGE THROUGH
COMPETITIVE INTELLIGENCE

by Cynthia Sharp, Esq.

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By now, most lawyers are well aware of the benefits of social media specific to the law practice setting. Trial lawyers capture damaging evidence from Facebook pages. Savvy researchers rely on favorite blogs or podcasts for perspectives and insights on current legal issues. Law firm marketers hope to attract new matters by promoting the brand through one or more social media platforms.

Another powerful approach involves the use of competitive intelligence as a means of guiding, informing, and leveraging your traditional marketing plan. Competitive intelligence includes all pertinent information about the external climate in which you practice.

Many readers already intuitively engage in competitive research as the mood strikes. For example, an attorney may read the LinkedIn profile of a potential referral source prior to a meeting or scout out the Facebook page of a relevant association. However, as with all marketing activities, results will improve when a strategic approach is adopted and consistently implemented.

As you review the following case study, contemplate how you can use the suggested approaches to further penetrate the market in your own practice arena.

Case Study: Natalie Stewart

Having practiced in the niche area of Special Education for the past ten years on the West Coast, Natalie Stewart sold her interest in the firm and relocated to the southern part of New Jersey for family reasons. The marketing plan outlined for her new practice emphasizes building and broadcasting a thought leadership brand as well as developing a strong referral base. Before she invests money in a new website or even begins serious networking, Natalie decided to step back and gather competitive intelligence from social media and other online resources about her area of practice, especially in the context of her new locale. She has no clients, no contacts, and no reputation in the local community and wants to build momentum as quickly as possible.

Competitor Law Firms

As a means of identifying her unique position in the market place, Natalie begins researching competitors by Googling “special education lawyer south Jersey.” Her review of several of the websites

and social media platforms is done with the following questions in mind: Does the firm practice exclusively in the special education arena? If not, what are the ancillary areas of practice? Are other professionals, such as a special education advocate, employed by the firm? Are the lawyers members of professional or community organizations? Where do they publish articles, and where do they speak?

After noting that one of the firms displays the logo of the Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA), she is inspired to join the organization after having hesitated for the past few years. As she reviews COPAA's website, she commits to submitting a proposal to speak at next year's annual conference.

Inserting the words "special education lawyer" in the Twitter search bar yields significant competitive intelligence. Not only does Natalie discover hashtags that she can incorporate into her own tweets to make them findable by her target audience, but she also notices a number of inquiries from individuals as well as organizations seeking referrals to lawyers in the field. As she thinks about hashtags, she types #specialneeds into the Twitter search bar and stumbles upon a wealth of resources on current social, practical, and medical issues affecting her client base. Allowing yourself to be creative and to simply "play around" can sometimes be the most productive way to spend a short period of time doing research.

In reviewing the competitor's LinkedIn profile, particular attention should be paid to the Groups to which they belong and the Companies they follow. Even if not in your locale, perhaps similar organizations exist close by. Another key is to check out the competitor's connections and recommendations and then seek to meet similar types. In reviewing the recommendations section of several other special education lawyers, Natalie notes testimonials from personal injury, workers compensation and immigration lawyers, and financial advisors, as well as educational consultants and advocates.

Potential Referral Sources

Not surprisingly, Natalie takes a strategic approach in developing her "stable" of referral sources based on information gleaned in the research outlined above. After creating an initial list of 20 potential individuals, she sets out to meet them and develop relationships. However, she begins by connecting through social media platforms and also invests the time to find out more about each of the individuals.

Tip: Even if you think you know someone, dig a little deeper. Last year, I was approached online by a potential client. As I scrutinized her profile and saw that we had gone to the same college, I concluded that was why I was chosen. In fact, she had not realized our commonality. When I pointed out that we were both Ball State Cardinals, the conversation warmed up considerably and ultimately led to a contract.

By the same token, prepare before attending networking functions. Prior to attending my first meeting of the ABA Solo, Small Firm and General Practice Division, I wrote one sentence on the Facebook page: “Who else is attending the conference in Denver?” Even though only two people answered on Facebook, I was greeted in person at the conference by a number of people who had seen the post.

Take the time to research the background of key people with whom you hope to connect at a function. Read enough about their most recent activities and accomplishments to be able to comment and ask questions when meeting them in person.

Clients

We could better serve our clients if we knew ahead of time what would make them happy. If we could read the minds of potential clients, we could draft marketing copy and choose keywords designed to attract them to our doors.

A few ways to work toward this mission are to (1) ask existing clients open-ended questions via a client satisfaction survey, (2) create a survey to distribute to prospective clients and/or referral sources, and (3) review online reviews of other attorneys in your practice area (even if not in your locale). I recommend implementation of all three.

(Upon request, I will e-mail a sample client satisfaction survey that can be tailored to your own practice. Please send your request by e-mail to cindy@thesharperlady.com.)

Reviews of other attorneys in your field can be found on LinkedIn, Avvo.com, website testimonials, and even Yelp. As Natalie read positive reviews of other special education attorneys, she noted that clients were happy when their attorneys were “honest, up-front, fair, thorough, fast, informative, passionate, courteous.” Her website copy and social media profiles should certainly contain some of those words (if they are true). Negative reviews will remind you how not to treat clients.

Thought Leadership Initiatives

Natalie enjoys giving presentations to all types of audiences and has also published two or three articles through the years. However, she has not been proactive in seeking speaking engagements or writing opportunities.

Before creating proposals to offer speeches or write articles, she wants to be fully aware of the topics of current interest to her target audience. After all, she prides herself on being “cutting edge.” While she has been running across pertinent material in the course of her routine research, she also looks to articles published on LinkedIn Pulse.

While searching Twitter for relevant content to review (such as blogs), Natalie stumbles on a promotion for an upcoming special education program sponsored by the New Jersey State Bar Foundation (NJSBF). Although the attorneys for this year’s program were selected long ago, she will contact the NJSBF in a few months to volunteer for next year’s program. Again, intelligence discovered randomly often holds more opportunity than the material originally sought.

Moving Forward

Novice and veteran attorneys alike can develop and implement a rudimentary marketing plan even with a limited budget. Through social media and other online resources, attorneys in any setting can gain a competitive advantage through strategically finding and analyzing competitive intelligence.