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ABA GPSolo eReport July/August 2017: Developing Your Greatest Resources

Strategically educating potential clients and referral sources as to the scope and benefits of a firm's legal services can play an integral part in building a robust law practice. Clients are attracted to attorneys whose expertise is highly regarded, and what better way to demonstrate focused knowledge than to write and speak about legal issues?

Until recent years, content marketing efforts were by and large restricted to writing for print publications and speaking before live audiences. However, the advent of social media provides an excellent and relatively inexpensive avenue by which to distribute a law firm's message to a significantly larger audience. Yet, most are not taking advantage of this valuable resource.

While 74 percent of firms responding to the *2016 ABA Legal Technology Survey Report* (tinyurl.com/ybetuub2) maintain a social media presence, only 8 percent of the respondents personally write a blog.

The remaining 92 percent certainly have a message to disseminate, but it remains unheard. My mission in this article is to share strategies for consistent, efficient, and effective content development. Naturally, once the content is written, it must be widely distributed. However, that topic is beyond the scope of this article. As you review the following case study, consider how the suggested approaches can be applied in your practice area.

Case Study

Attorney Ricki Ford has built a successful estate planning and special-needs trust practice in central Ohio. Since her oldest son was diagnosed with a learning disability at age four, she has

taken a hands-on approach to ensure that he receives all the educational services to which he is entitled.

Over the past few years, Ricki has attracted a handful of clients with special education issues and now seeks to expand her practice to help others through her newfound knowledge. Because she knows that content marketing will play an integral part in sustainable success, she follows the steps below to get started.

Step 1: Create a Vision

Dr. Stephen R. Covey's advice to "begin with the end in mind" can be applied to most aspects of your life. Ricki will declare the initiative a success if she accomplishes the following each month over the first three months:

- Create and distribute one "client alert." The distribution will be by e-blast, blog, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.
- Write and distribute two additional blog posts on the firm's blog.
- Write and distribute one blog post to an online resource read by parents of special-needs children.
- Write and distribute one blog post bimonthly to an online resource read by other professionals serving special-needs children.
- Write and distribute one article bimonthly to be published in an online legal periodical.

Realizing that her vision is ambitious, Ricki breaks down the project so that it is manageable.

Step 2: Create a Monthly Theme

Ricki's secret to being prolific is to focus on one topic per month, which allows her to repurpose her research as she writes for the various audiences listed under Step 1.

She chooses the monthly themes after reflecting on the interests of her target audience:

- May: impact of the recent U.S. Supreme Court case *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District* on special education.
- June: transitioning from high school to college.
- July: bullying.

Step 3: Organize Resources

Ricki then sets up electronic and paper files for each month's topic that will serve as repositories for pertinent material and random thoughts that she will jot down about the topic. She also gathers notes made in preparation for two informal presentations previously given to groups of parents at her son's school. Again, it pays to repurpose.

Ricki also has implemented a process under which copies of all presentation materials, articles, and even snippets from briefs are organized by topic. This "bank" of intellectual capital can be updated through the years as laws evolve and also serves as inspiration for new ideas.

Step 4: Set Deadlines

Ricki has established an editorial calendar that she adheres to with resolution. Planning ahead helps to combat the "tyranny of the blank page" faced by most writers at some point or other.

Here is Ricki's editorial calendar:

- Client alert: first of each month.
- Law firm blog posts: second and fourth Mondays.
- Outside blog for parents: 15th of each month.
- Outside blog for professionals and online legal periodical: third Monday of alternate months.

Are you willing to mark your calendar with similar commitments in order to stay on track?

Step 5: Write Compelling Content

Both you and your readers will become bored if you restrict your writing to dry legal content. One way to make your subject matter more relatable is by writing case studies. Stories result in an emotional connection with your audience, making them more likely to keep you in mind when a legal need arises. Be mindful of the duty of confidentiality when constructing the scenarios.

Blogs and articles featuring checklists and frequently asked questions are also popular because they provide useful information in an easy-to-digest format.

Another technique is to interview an expert in a related field whose expertise would be beneficial to your audience. Presume that Ricki publishes the perspectives of a local educational consultant in her blog. She can then send a link to the consultant to circulate to his or her mailing list, thereby driving additional traffic to Ricki's blog.

Why not conduct your own informal survey? I often circulate surveys created on Google Forms to e-mail lists as well as through social media sites. The responses have been very helpful in rounding out various articles and blog posts. For example, Ricki could survey parents of special-needs children about their biggest frustrations with the IEP process and use her findings as foundational material for a blog post.

Step 6: Fine-Tune Your E-mail Subject Line and Byline

When sending blog posts or other content by e-mail, create catchy subject lines. Recently, I received a blog sent with the subject line "My most recent blog post." Because my attention was not piqued, I immediately hit "delete." On the other hand, if one of Ricki's potential clients reads a subject line such as "6 Steps to a Successful IEP Meeting," he or she may very well open it because the topic is pertinent. Another tip is to keep the subject line at 50 characters or less so that it will be fully readable.

Now that Ricki is submitting her content for publication on other websites and blogs, she needs to develop a series of bylines that are kept in her bank of intellectual capital. My byline (at the end of this article) changes depending on the audience, as should yours.

Think of the byline as a written elevator pitch with contact information that changes depending on the publication. For example, if you are submitting content to your alumna journal, you would make reference to the fact that you are a graduate. Suggested byline for Ricki: “Attorney Ricki Ford helps students with disabilities obtain all the educational services they need and to which they are entitled. She can be reached at [contact information].”

Writing with a view toward search engine optimization is to be strived for as well. For comprehensive information on this topic, check out findability.com.

Conclusion

Modern marketing philosophies emphasize “pull” marketing because audiences are engaged by a carefully crafted key message. Those with the capability to generate relevant content on a consistent basis will capture “mind share,” which will no doubt increase their market share. Persistence and consistency in these efforts are a prerequisite to success.

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Business development leader and veteran attorney Cynthia Sharp, Esq., works with motivated lawyers seeking to generate additional revenue for their law firms. The business development strategies and skill sets that she shares were developed and tested over a period of 30 years in practice and are constantly refined to reflect modern marketing techniques. For additional information about business development issues, check out thesharperlady.com.