

Rainmaking

How to Focus Your Marketing: Pointers for Solo Practices

SUSAN SALTONSTALL DUNCAN | Solo practitioners often tout themselves as generalists, offering to serve the legal needs of anyone and everyone. But you should not try to be all things to all people in your marketing and rainmaking efforts. The best and most effective way is take a focused and deliberate approach.

Many solos fear that if they don't promote themselves as general practitioners, they won't be able to generate enough income. This often corresponds with a reluctance to turn down business, even when the matter appears unprofitable, on the assumption that it's better to do work for a lower fee than not to have the work at all.

The truth, however, is that of all the law firms out there, the smallest ones must be the most vigilant in targeting the clients they serve, the skills they promote, and the marketing they do. Fortunately, there are a number of ways to become more focused and reap greater rewards from your business development efforts.



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Assess Your Marketplace

Pursuing a targeted approach doesn't mean that you must work exclusively in one or two practice areas. It means that you must make some deliberate choices about what you will emphasize most in your proactive marketing. The first step in determining your choices is to assess trends and demographics relative to the broader skill sets you have.

Who uses or needs legal services you provide? Are these individuals or families that can be categorized by age, income levels, occupation or gender? Alternatively, are they particular types of businesses, schools, associations or other organizations? Consider what trends are affecting these types of clients and what impact it might have on your practice. Remember, things tend to be cyclical and new areas of specialty appear with new laws, new technologies and the like.

Next, identify the types of services that are in greatest demand or are in decline. Economic cycles, for example, may be positively or negatively affecting residential and commercial real estate, school budgets, bankruptcies,

employment rates or family stability. Certain issues will also be affected by the location of your client base, whether it is strictly local, regional or without any borders. For instance, you might have intellectual property or immigration law expertise you can promote through the Internet and distance referrals.

Now, considering the range of legal services your targets need, for which can you expect to be paid a high rate or full fee versus those for which you have to discount your fee? Also consider what services are likely to generate additional or ongoing work or referrals. It's harder to truly prosper if you only represent clients for single transactions.

Assess Your Competition

You will be most successful by finding niches you can fill and promoting yourself in a way that is different from the hundreds or thousands of other lawyers you are likely to be competing with. To do this, research what other lawyers in your town or region are offering and what their levels of experience and proficiency are. Keep your eyes and ears open for opportunities to review their marketing literature and approaches—and listen to what people have to say about the lawyers in your area. Talk to your current clients and others you know about who your competitors are and what advantages—or disadvantages—they may have.

In the end, you don't want to

be just one more lawyer competing for business in an area, because it's likely that you'll then compete on the basis of price, which will neither help your bottom line nor garner longer-term relationships with clients.

Assess Your Personal Network and Passions

It's important to be able to promote your services to and through the people you know. Take a look at who is in your current network at all levels—business colleagues, bankers and other professional advisers, family, friends, your spouse's colleagues and advisors, your children's universe (coaches, teachers, friends' parents) and so forth. Also look at networks you may not have cultivated recently but could reestablish ties with, including former high school, college or law school classmates.

Next, try to identify activities that coincide with your personal interests and passions. Consider the types of forums or types of activities in which you are comfortable (or not.) Think, for example, about bar association functions, social networking events, civic, political or charitable causes, sports outings or local business groups. Also consider what forums would allow you to promote your expertise through articles, speeches, seminars, Internet materials or related publicity vehicles.

Set Goals with a SWOT Analysis

Once you have assessed all the preceding factors, you can then prepare a SWOT analysis. SWOT stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. This analysis will help you sift through the information you have gathered and narrow your options for targeting your marketing.

Based on your analysis, determine which two or three areas you want to focus on by balancing trends and needs, profitability, competitor void, your networks and referral sources, and your skills and experience. You might find you want to focus on nursing-home guardianship and other elder-care issues, small family businesses, condo owners' associations, franchisees, home-building contractors, family law with a focus on women, gay couples or children's rights, to name just a few examples. Having developed several concrete goals and objectives, you can then devise a proper marketing action plan.

Make Your Plan and Get the Word Out

Your marketing action plan should include a number of components—but each action should be included only if it specifically helps you achieve a goal. As you consider each action, keep in mind the services you are promoting and the targets you hope to reach or retain—be they current or potential clients, referral sources or networking contacts.

Find out where your targets go, what they read and what they feel is valuable. Remember to be focused! Here are just a few of your many options.

■ **Articles.** Write an op-ed piece for a daily paper, or propose a regular column for your community paper in which you focus on issues, trends and solutions in your niche.

■ **Seminars.** Do continuing education seminars for banks, CPAs or realtors, or offer joint seminars with a referral source with whom you can share invitation lists and complementary advice in the same niche.

■ **Radio or cable shows.** Many com-

munity radio stations and cable TV networks have slots for guests who can talk on topics of interest to the community.

■ **Community or civic sponsorships.**

Consider sponsoring local sports teams and imprinting your company and logo on their team shirts, or place tombstone ads in event programs or directories. Serve on business, civic or charitable boards in areas of personal interest to you.

■ **Publicity.** Look at local and regional newspapers and also at company or business papers in your area—for example, the largest realtor in your locale may have a company newsletter you can contribute to. Contact reporters or editors to let them know your areas of expertise and provide them with ideas you have for stories on trends.

■ **Advertising.** Consider how much you need to invest in Yellow Pages and other directory advertising. Ask for demographics and return on investment statistics.

■ **Web site.** A Web site can be a very effective way for people to find you. Having an online presence is especially advantageous for lawyers whose expertise transcends the local marketplace.

When all is said and done, developing and growing a healthy practice is highly dependent on reputation and relationships. People hire lawyers they know, like and trust. This requires you to get out of your office to meet people, provide mutual value, promote your expertise, and nurture relationships with clients and referral sources. Be focused on your targets and what you have to offer, pursue strategies that will get you in front of clients and prospects, and then exceed expectations at every level. LP