

# Professional Services Marketing —

## Opting for the High Road

*By: Les Altenberg*

There's an old expression that one bad apple can spoil things for the whole bunch. And nowhere is this more than true than in the marketing of professional service businesses ( law firms, medical practices, accounting firms etc.) Like many other types of business categories (such as car dealers and insurance salesman), professional service businesses have become victims of their own industry. And in many cases, deservedly so.

For example, the task of marketing a law firm is made difficult by the way many firms, most of them smaller, have gone about the task of promoting themselves. Shriill cries that echo on the TV throughout the night are augmented by print ads - some huge, some miniscule, which promise aggressive representation regardless of the legal issue involved. Small-time attorneys have had some short-term success hawking their wares to the uneducated segment of the public which fails to recognize that he who shouts the loudest is not necessarily the best candidate for advocating their cause. Such practices, while potentially garnering short-term gains, ultimately jeopardize the stature of these attorneys within the public, business and legal communities -- hence, greatly diminishing their capacity to accomplish anything worthwhile at all.

So how then does a professional service firm which wishes to promote itself, but avoid the low road, do so?

The “high road.” It is a term often-used but just as often misunderstood. As a marketing philosophy, it’s an approach which does not look to “make a killing” today, but which offers a long-term philosophy for gaining new clients, cross-selling clients on other firm services and establishing a foundation from which the firm can weather both the good as well as the bad times.

The high road really involves two elements - “credibility-building” and “awareness-building.”

### **Credibility-Building**

This term refers to a business’ general responsibility to the community it serves and with it the opportunity to become a general resource for information on any of a number of issues. Once it decides to aggressively market itself, one of the first things a service business must do is address the question of whether to promote itself as a whole, or specific departments or services within the entity. The answer really is both. And by doing one, it should be noted, one is also always doing the other.

The expertise of the organization or of an individual or department within the organization can often be quite easily leveraged through an understanding of one basic concept -- the chances for the successful marketing of anything can be significantly heightened when we take away as much “work” as possible on the part of the target audience. Clearly this is true, for example, in direct mail which targets consumers and is designed to sell a specific product. The clearer the copy and visuals, the easier it is for the consumer to understand and appreciate the offer.

But many professional services businesses do not typically send direct mail to the general public. So, what might its target audience be and how can the principle of “taking away work” be applied? More importantly, how does this translate into enhanced credibility within a given area?

The answer is “the media.” Like many professional service industries themselves, the media has an aura of authority, of knowledge, of “fact.” What most shrewd marketers understand, however, is that editors, reporters, producers, etc. are really no different than any other target market. “Take away the work” for them, and the likelihood of biting on a story increases greatly.

What does that mean? It means providing media sources, not just with relevant story ideas (that’s a given which any public relations textbook will suggest), but providing the substantiation, facts, counter-arguments (even opposing side spokespersons) to make that story take off on its own. Offering interviewees for broadcast who can coherently speak in front of a camera “takes away” one more headache for a producer. An “expert” who can address an issue articulately and without a lot of lingo “takes away” one from a reporter.

Most professionals are surprised to learn how relatively easy it can be to garner such publicity. The obvious examples to pursue are those involving the firm or practice itself - a landmark case won, a high profile client taken on a new procedure utilized, etc. But opportunities arise out of the day-to-day happenings in the world around us:

- “These laws will have a direct impact in the manner in which our accounting clients should invest their savings.”

- A presidential election is contested in Florida -- “We contested that congressman’s election in our state, also with punch card ballots?”
- A president needs a new hearing aid— “Hey we just put in the same type of aid on a patient of ours.”
- A tire manufacturer is sued—“Hey, didn’t we win a pretty big van rollover case recently?”

The beauty of credibility-building is that it works much like a train pulling out of a station - slowly at first, but then faster and faster, until you are at full throttle. The truth about public relations is that the more you do, the more you get. Why? Because like anyone else, the media feels more comfortable taking on those with experience in their types of formats (“less work,” remember?).

A few years ago, our agency had the enjoyable experience of working with a small law firm which successfully handled a landmark case involving secondhand smoke. From the publicity garnered, several other secondhand smoke cases arose. Not bad for a firm whose expertise actually is in the area of -- divorce! However, the success of these efforts can’t be measured in the additional secondhand smoke cases garnered, but in the ability to leverage the firm’s newfound media credentials into new opportunities to speak and be heard on those issues on which its practice had actually been built. A 30 percent increase in revenue following the first year of its promotional effort is also a good way to measure it as well!

Credibility -- it’s the long-term variable which, if you don’t blow it, invariably stands the test of time.

## **Awareness-Building**

Every marketing textbook talks about it. You can't meet an advertising executive without hearing about it. Awareness. Awareness. Awareness.

But, as discussed, simply generating awareness is not enough if one is building a "strong foundation."

The public relations oriented activities discussed earlier can generate some awareness, but it's not enough, especially since you have no ultimate say as to whether your story sees the light of day or not.

Rather, such activities must be augmented by a carefully constructed branding program which achieves awareness -- but awareness of the firm or practice in a manner in which you wish it to be perceived. Accomplishing this is a tricky business for two reasons. First, awareness-building inevitably requires some type of advertising or promotional activity. This alone can tend to affect the "professional" image of a business in an industry where self-promotion is still often seen as somewhat undesirable. The second, related element that makes this somewhat difficult are those organizations which take such self-promotional activities to more crass levels.

So successful awareness-building really requires more than just being willing to spend some money. It means being willing to spend the time and energy as well. Before a logo is designed, an ad is written, television commercial produced, a professional service business needs to look introspectively. It must ask difficult questions of itself: What is this firm or practice about? What is its culture? What are its strengths and weaknesses? What area can be leveraged? Who exactly is this firm's "ideal" type of client/patient? What does this firm/practice wish to be five to 10 years from now?

A process needs to be put into place which not only addresses these-questions, but which translates the answers into appropriate, creative strategies and ultimately into words and pictures which resonate with the intended recipient. For example, our agency recently created a commercial for a client which only depicted children playing. It never showed a single lawyer, office or court room.

This is, of course, much more difficult than simply throwing an ad or commercial together. And the truth is, initially a process such as described above may not even garner more revenue than the “thrown together” approach. But ultimately, a carefully defined image works beyond its first pass. It takes on a life of its own, allowing a business to evolve over time in the public’s consciousness, without necessarily needing to re-invent itself every 12 to 18 months. The result - not only a bigger business, but a better , more profitable one. In the long run, building credibility and building awareness go hand-in-hand.

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