

LMA 2009 CONFERENCE PREVIEW...NOW WHAT?

CHANGE AT YOUR SERVICE

How Vendors Can Help Marketers Manage Uncertainty

By Amy Spach, AS Written Communications

Nearly a year ago, when the concept of change was selected as the theme for the annual conference, no one could have anticipated the extent of change we'd be facing today. From capital and real estate markets to the new legal services reality, it's been a bumpy ride.

Steeling oneself and holding on tightly are wise first-line approaches. But with law firm marketing budgets under review and adjustment, or perhaps remaining flat at best, standing still is not an option. Be prepared. As lawyers' billable hours decrease, the demand for marketing support will rise, just as the pull on your resources require tougher decisions and greater creativity.

Clearly, today's challenge is doing more with less. To help with this changing balance, consider looking outside, to your vendors and consultants. When budgets were plentiful, they were there with services, gadgets and products galore to help you and your law firm excel. Service providers are still there with some strategies for squeaking every dollar's worth out of your budget. And then some.

For Worse, For Better

"Service providers need to show that they're invested in their clients' success and can make a real difference in their marketing efforts, especially during tough times," says Doug Hoover, a consultant with Hildebrandt International's Client Development and Growth practice group.

An advisor to hundreds of firms, Hoover says the downturn is nationwide but believes there are opportunities for vendors to build value-based relationships. He predicts that outside providers will be asked to fill increasing performance gaps that marketing departments are encountering. Instead of major sales coups, there will be short-term projects, such as extending the use of previously purchased products. Marketing directors should ask for assistance and vendors should welcome the chance to become a scalable and trusted resource during a client's time of need.

Hoover recommends that service providers start the conversation, ask clients what they need and "dig deep into your area of expertise and don't be limited by the strict definition of your products and services."

A Little Goes A Long Way

Sometimes making small adjustments to previously healthy budgets can mean a great deal. For marketing manager Mary Margaret Gorman of McGlinchey Stafford PLLC, her network of consultants and vendors is vital to how she serves her 190 attorneys. These days, she counts on them to be "proactive on the front end of a project and suggest ways to save time, and thus money, without sacrificing quality."

For example, Gorman worked with her creative interactive team to trim this year's budget for the firm's acclaimed on-line holiday card. Together, they easily shifted some outside billable activity back to the firm's staff, and the card still came out great.

Back to Basics

Another way to calm turbulence is returning to basics. That's what, IncisveMedia law firm consultant Paula Ryplewski is advocating to clients. Getting more mileage from advertising and editorial opportunities are a few ways she's been working with stretched firms. "Service is the major distinguisher now. Keeping the conversation going, providing valuable intelligence and finding out what's important to your client are more important than ever."

Starting and extending the conversations between in-house marketers and service providers is a key element in this year's conference. At programs and in exhibit halls, vendors can hear directly from marketing staff on creating value and better leveraging their services to help law firms reach their marketing goals.

Join us for the start, and continuation of, some beautiful relationships at LMA's 2009 National Conference, "Change... Now What?" at the Gaylord Resort and Conference Center, National Harbor, MD. More information on the conference is at www.legalmarketing.org.

Next Strategies: Driving Change in Law Marketing

Amy Spach, Principal of AS Written Communications, works with law firms to create Web content, articles and marketing materials. Contact her at www.aswrittencom.com or 323.876.6374.