Fitting The Attorney Mindset: Managing Change in a Law Firm

WHITE PAPER

By William Josten & Ian Turvill

In recent years, nearly every aspect of how a law firm does business has changed. From the way research is done to how clients are billed, the legal market has been in a near constant state of transformation after several decades of relative stability.

The way in which law firms find new clients and new opportunities is no exception. Strategies that worked well in the past are being adapted to fit an ever-changing market. Today, attorneys and the law firm's business development team must take a more proactive approach in feeding the firm's pipeline of potential clients.

But how law firms go about responding to these changes and implementing new strategies to address the current market remains a difficult question to answer.

Ian Turvill, Chief Marketing Officer at Freeborn & Peters, a midsize law firm in Chicago, has seen just this type of shift at his firm. "When I arrived at the firm three years ago there was a very significant emphasis on sponsorship and advertising to establish name recognition and brand recall among prospective clients. Now the market has evolved to a place where we're competing with so many large players and established brands that as a midsize firm, we have to understand far more about the client's specific circumstances if we are to have a chance of winning their business."

CHANGING THE IDEA OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

To meet this challenge, the firm has turned to a process that Turvill calls "the tip of the spear." The emphasis is on providing the attorneys with as much information and intelligence about the client as possible so that, when the attorney has the opportunity to approach that prospective client, they have the best chance possible to win that conversation.

The process can be broken down into two key components.

The first is education. Any attorney at the income partner level or above can take advantage of business development coaching offered by the marketing department. Attorneys benefit from learning new ideas about how to find new opportunities. And the firm has the ability to educate around best practices to better align the firm's business development strategy.

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The second component in this process is a focus by the marketing team on providing quick responses to requests for client intelligence information. As Turvill points out, historically one of the biggest challenges in compiling a comprehensive report of a client's litigation and representation history was the need to piece the report together. Even if the data were being collected from a single source, it was necessary to run multiple searches and manually compile the results into a digestible data set. By utilizing more efficient prospecting tools, like Thomson Reuters Monitor Suite, the marketing team can pull together the report much more quickly. "We can mold it to reflect the particular circumstances of that opportunity and deliver the answer to the attorney very quickly," says Turvill. As a result, information requests that used to take hours or days to prepare are now being addressed in minutes.

CHANGING THE WAY ATTORNEYS WORK

One of the biggest concerns when implementing any sort of change at a law firm is the impact it will have on timekeepers' workflow.

In response to resistance from attorneys, Turvill has taken an effective approach by appealing to the attorneys' established habits. "A litigator will go to great lengths to prepare for a trial by gathering all the evidence necessary for the trial. In the same way they'd prepare for a trial, by leveraging better information about their clients they are simply gathering the information that allows them to be best prepared when meeting that client. So it's not about making attorneys change. It's about helping them to work in a fashion that's much more consistent with their mindset."

Rather than forcing an attorney to change their workflow, this approach encourages the attorney to behave in a manner much more consistent with the way they would prepare for any other stage of representation.

Attorneys like to be prepared. They like to be informed. And they will more readily engage in additional activities if they are being equipped to handle their new tasks in the same way they would address more familiar ones.

CHANGING THE CLIENT CONVERSATION

The firm has found that approaching client meetings from a more educated and informed position also helps to avoid what Turvill calls "the dance." Before adopting a more intelligence-driven strategy, the majority of a conversation between an attorney and a client may have consisted of the attorney trying to gain information about what types of matters the client had pending. By starting the conversation with better intelligence about the client, the attorney is in a stronger position to share the firm's experience with the types of matters the client is engaged in, helping the attorney to demonstrate a clearer understanding of the general counsel's current position and what value the firm can bring to the client.

CHANGING ATTORNEY COMPENSATION

A key driver to the success of a changing business development strategy is attorney compensation.

To encourage effective adoption of new business development strategies, firms should be mindful to implement a compensation structure that does not preclude joint selling by partners and encourages collaboration

Utilizing a firm's intelligence resources, a litigator can spot opportunities that exist with an existing corporate client. The litigation partner can then approach the corporate partner for help in developing the cross-sell opportunity.

"Necessarily, you need to have a compensation system that allows both partners to benefit from reaching out to the client," Turvill says.

CHANGING THE WAY DATA IS SOURCED

In responding to the changing role of business development at his firm, Turvill had to confront the question of how to source the data he needed to support his initiatives.

In searching for a data provider, Turvill looked first for a solution that could solve for a challenge he had consistently identified: the need to provide a greater level of service to the client by way of a better understanding of the client's situation. To find tools to meet that need, Freeborn & Peters looked to providers that were already well integrated with the firm, had a relationship with the firm's library, and a reputation that made users feel comfortable when working with the provider.

By working with a provider that was already well known to the firm, the identification and implementation of the needed solutions were simplified. Conversely, it may have taken longer to demonstrate the value and integrity of the data when working with a provider with whom the firm did not have the same foundation.

CHANGING THE WAY OPPORTUNITIES ARE TARGETED

With the new strategies that Freeborn & Peters has implemented for business development, Turvill says that their attorneys have become far more systematic with whom they target as possible clients. "In the past, reaching out to potential new clients would have been perhaps haphazard. Now, we're being far more strategic in picking our shots. We can see if it's a good fit for areas where the firm has demonstrated strength. We can ask, are we a good fit for the kinds of law firms this client typically engages? By better understanding the kinds of firms a corporate law department uses today, we can guide the attorneys as to which clients provide the best possible opportunities for success."

IAN TURVILL | Chief Marketing Officer of Freeborn & Peters LLP

Ian Turvill is the Chief Marketing Officer of Freeborn & Peters LLP, a full-service law firm headquartered in Chicago. Ian oversees the firm's marketing and business development functions, including marketing strategy, marketing communications, digital media, public relations, and client events and outreach.

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