



Marketing your practice with paralegals

BY LINDA S. JEVHIRIAN

Paralegals enhance your image.

Once thought of as being outside the conservative field of law, marketing of legal services is now an accepted — and necessary — practice. One often overlooked asset is the paralegal. Rounding out the full service team, paralegals' added value can enhance the image of a law firm. Including them in your marketing plan might even close the deal.

Image-building can be created with a logo and a collection of brochures, newsletters, web sites, office sites, and other marketing materials that go into the mix of selling services. Once the concept has been captured, however, it is only as effective as the people who represent it. Your professional staff — including paralegals — should be viewed as one large selling team that personifies your culture and image. Anything less makes your expensive efforts a waste of time and money.

Paralegals, by their principle, are a modern concept. Initially introduced to the practice of law in the late 1960s, they have revolutionized the way law is practiced.

Clients want attorneys who can solve 21st Century business and legal problems. Paralegal utilization is a creative and forward thinking process that mimics this very ideal. As such, their presence can invigorate an otherwise predictable marketing plan.

Paralegal use is client driven

Even though paralegals work directly for attorneys, their work is ultimate-

THE LAWYER'S PARALEGAL

ly for the clients, and their position should be client-driven. A client survey or needs analysis can help attorneys determine what type of paralegal is required to meet the client's expectations.

In the survey, solicit information about the client's business to determine what knowledge the paralegal will need to understand the work. Moreover, you should find out if the client wants to work and communicate directly with the paralegal and how. Electronic messaging and document transfer are sophisticated processes and, while some clients are totally comfortable with it, others may prefer old-fashioned fax machines and telephones.

Posture additional questions depending on your familiarity with the client and your current resources. By anticipating specific client needs you will be able to address their requests immediately. If you have to add staff in order to accommodate them, close the sale by assuring them that you have the ability to do so.

Paralegals save the client money

The "dollars and cents" of your service must be convincing and fair because markets are more competitive, clients are more educated, and services are more expensive. The marketing plan should include an analysis of how your paralegal can make you more efficient at a more reasonable price.

It is no hidden secret that paralegals are economical, but your client should not think they are getting "cheap" serv-

ices. Create a presentation that demonstrates how paralegal fees are determined and how higher fees are reserved for attorney work that the paralegal is not authorized to do.

Paralegal billing rates vary from specialty to specialty, and reflect the level of expertise and years of experience. Several national associations do compensation surveys that include billing rates by region and specialty, and they are worth reviewing. Knowing what other lawyers charge — and what clients are used to paying — will help you price your services competitively.

Paralegals have a separate knowledge base

Paralegals have a separate knowledge base and add value to your services. They often develop expertise in areas that lawyers sometimes do not have time to explore. One prominent area is technology. Automated solutions are changing rapidly and they are complex. Clients attracted to modern methods will be impressed when they find out that you have dedicated a paralegal to an area that will streamline their work and ultimately cost them less.

One way to market this concept is to designate the paralegal as a specialist and incorporate it into their title, such as "paralegal automation specialist." Putting your paralegal in charge of a specific area assures that the client will receive ample attention. Opportunities of this nature also motivate the paralegal to remain with the firm and clients are more likely to trust a knowledgeable and consistent staff.

Paralegals sell legal services

All of the professionals who have client contact should source for new business. Selling the benefits of the paralegal requires an understanding of what they do in all areas of the practice and why they are effective.

One way to keep the selling staff current is to do an in-house presentation that illustrates paralegal services. Specific roles can change and attorneys should be updated frequently so they can adjust their role if necessary. A separate, more formal presentation can be done for clients.

In addition to practice responsibilities, both sessions should include a discussion about ethics. All parties should be aware of the risks of the unauthorized practice of law and the limits of the paralegal's authority. Equally as important is a discussion about confidentiality and avoiding conflicts of interest. Serving refreshments and leaving time to mingle will encourage clients to ask questions and discuss their needs.

Paralegals who work closely with clients should get to know them. Introducing the paralegal at lunch and business development meetings is much more effective than a simple brochure that describes their function. If the client has employees that are involved in their matters, invite them too. Getting to know more about the client's operation will provide another in road to learning about their needs.

Paralegals are professional

There are several ways to demonstrate the professionalism of the paralegal. Marketing tools can include case studies that illustrate successful utilization; a welcome letter from the paralegal to the client with contact in-

formation; a portfolio that includes paralegal credentials, achievements, requirements for continuing education, association membership, and professional and community activities.

There is no license or certified requirement for paralegals. Specific credentials are left to the discretion of the lawyers who hire them. You should consider making educational guidelines part of firm policy. Some of the national paralegal organizations have published statements about their position on degrees, and they are worth reviewing. There is strong argument for requiring an undergraduate degree and paralegal schooling but, in practical terms, experience is often an exception.

Lawyers can point out the talents of their paralegal by writing an article showcasing an achievement or an involvement that is extra special. This can be as simple as an in-house training session they attend or present, or as sophisticated as an outside speaking engagement or publishing opportunity. The piece can be included in the company literature, sent to the local media with a press release, and sent directly to your clients.

Publicizing that your paralegal is in charge of a pro bono case or charitable project shows a community-centered orientation that can appeal to clients. Team teaching a class at a local school or seminar is an excellent way to demonstrate knowledge and expertise. Whatever method you choose, putting your paralegal in the spotlight once in a while will impress your clients and give you more clout.

Rainmaking is not magic

Rainmaking is a term that emerged as part of the buzz terminology of mar-

keting in the 1980s. The informal definition is somewhat amusing: The process of attempting to produce rain, as by magic.

At some point in the history of developing a successful law practice it probably was magical. Contacts were often made in closely-knit societies and country club settings. Families passed clients from generation to generation. Inheriting a law practice is a good start, but generating new clients requires full steam marketing, not magic.

The formal definition of rainmaking is more akin to the modern practice: The process of achieving excellent results in a profession or field.

This sounds more like the underpinnings of a well thought out, strategic marketing approach. Clients are impressed with attorneys who surround themselves with excellence. It makes sense that lawyers would include the expertise and value added services of their paralegal in their marketing plan.



Linda S. Jevahirian is the founder and president of Legal Search & Management, Inc., a specialty firm that provides temporary and permanent re-

cruiting to firms and corporations interested in improving their practice through the use of legal assistants. She is a noted speaker, trainer and author, and her articles have appeared in numerous legal publications, including the Michigan Bar Journal, Michigan Lawyers Weekly, The National Law Journal and Legal Assistant Today.

Further information about can be found at legalsearchonline.net or contact Linda at (248) 471-3443. Permission for reprints is available.



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