

## The Changing Face of Marketing for the Small Legal Firm

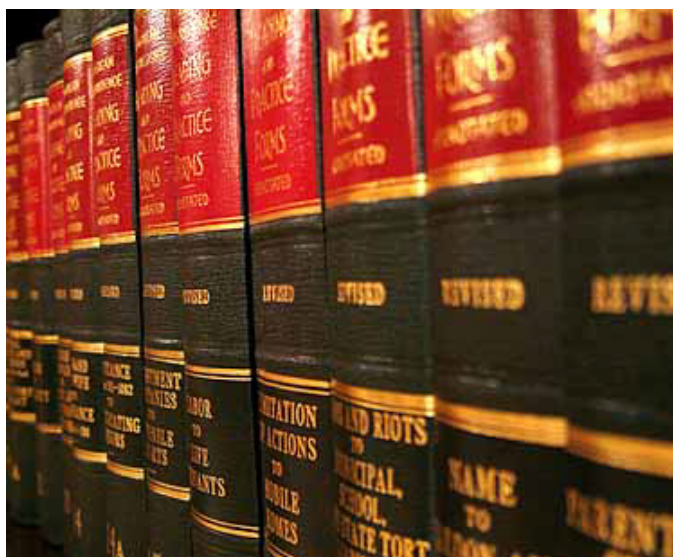
The pace of change in the modern world economy is often too difficult for even the most progressive firm. Innovation creates a constant flux of change and regeneration, requiring infinite flexibility and shortening the life cycle of all businesses. It is in this environment that we witness a rapid evolution in the UK legal sector. The traditional methods of attracting clients are by no means obsolete but there is a rapid development of new marketing techniques, adopted from the wider business and cultural landscape. It is the purpose of this article to examine emerging trends in the marketing activity of small law firms, and assess which are likely to develop further.

A recent survey by Lexis Nexis Martindale-Hubbell examined trends in marketing activity and the views of partners and fee-earners within small legal firms (defined as those with between eleven and twenty active lawyers). The survey discovered that 89 per

cent of respondents perceived the operation of a website to be the most valuable strategy for expanding their business. This is an interesting perspective given the internet's minor role in traditional legal firm marketing, providing a case for further examination.

The internet has developed from a simple information repository into an active forum for the sharing of ideas, art and media. Rather than simply posting static information, web users are now adapting and developing the internet with each visit. Video sharing websites, blogs and social networks are all aspects of this modern phenomenon. Where this is of interest in the context of legal firm marketing is in the internet's ability to demonstrate knowledge and expertise, while simultaneously improving communications between clients and lawyers. This is a strategy first adopted by larger LLPs, but has now spread across the industry. The emergence of the 'legal firm blog' is the clearest example of how the internet is changing as a marketing tool. Lawyers are now posting their views and insights for public scrutiny, hoping to attract interest from potential clients. The effectiveness of such practices is difficult to gauge but the wider exposure created by a properly targeted and promoted blog may well create a potent marketing tool.

One of the most serious developments in small legal firm marketing over the past five years has been the repackaging of legal products. Marketing becomes more straightforward when products are made concise and tangible. Breaking down legal



services into constituent parts clarifies their purpose in the eyes of prospective clients. This is the marketing theory behind recent legal product repackaging but does not explain why firms have only begun to follow this route in recent years. One theory behind such changes returns to the impact of new technologies as outlined above. The growing competitiveness of the industry is leading to greater specialisation, the result being increasing merger activity amongst larger firms and small legal firms beginning to develop greater market share in certain sectors. The narrowing of the service range means that firms look to repackage their products, providing expanded detail and a higher level of expertise within a small range of services. Law firm clients want to cherry pick the services they require and so demand greater flexibility in terms of service offerings.

The Legal Services Act is likely to have a dramatic impact on the provision of High Street legal services. The reform plans to revolutionise the current system of complaints handling by creating the Office for Legal Complaints (OLC) and allows lawyers and non-lawyers to operate together. It also relaxes the rules regarding external ownership and investment in the legal sector. Banks, supermarkets and other more strongly branded organisations are likely to increase their market share among retail legal services because of this new legislation. Law firms traditionally suffer from relatively weak brands outside of their own profession. It is likely that only the firms who are able to develop a widely recognised brand will survive. This trend may create an opportunity for the small or specialist legal firm, on account of their ability to adapt and provide a distinctive



offering within a particular sector, as opposed to the broad range of services marketed by larger firms. The impact on marketing activity from the new legislation is likely to be severe.

The key theme emerging from all these recent trends in marketing for small legal firms is the impact of new technology on the sector. Law firms have traditionally been 'late-movers' when it comes to technological innovation. The internet age has left many lagging behind the curve in terms of their marketing activity, failing to take advantage of new opportunities. The future is likely to see the more successful firms begin to properly implement new technologies and integrate them with traditional marketing methods.