

Hiring the Right Law Firm CMO: Avoiding Musical Chairs

Article By:

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Every few years, a well-known game of musical chairs takes place within law firms. “CMO A” leaves one firm to go to the next and a new senior marketer, “CMO B,” takes the newly-vacated spot. It is certainly something that the profession can count on happening.

Today’s CMO is integral to a law firm’s operation. They drive strategic plans, knock-down silos between marketing functions and execute on industry and practice plans. Imagine their sudden departure. Upheaval of marketing leadership in professional service organizations can be both unsettling and costly.

What are the factors firms should consider when hiring a CMO? What are the steps that lead to longevity? In my work with law firms on their marketing strategy, often leading them to hire C-level marketers, I have found there are 4 questions that law firm leaders should ask themselves.

Is this a cultural match?

Cultural integration within a firm can allow a CMO to fit in beautifully, have the ability to get work done, and partner with lawyers to help them achieve marketing success. With the wrong personality match between the CMO and the partners, the effort can be a disaster. If you combine a CMO with a very aggressive approach and a firm hesitant to market, the mismatch can turn the firm away from marketing for years to come; however, if you place an introvert CMO who waits for directions, in a firm filled with experienced, fast-paced superstar marketers, that is likely to fail as well. Finding the right personality fit and a matching marketing approach is essential. As they say in most relationships, chemistry is everything. Get to know the candidate and make sure they get to know your firm before entering into an agreement.

Is the experience level correct?

There have been many situations over the past years where well-established law firms have hired superstar marketers, yet something goes wrong. Often these are people with great experience in branding or strategy who have served successfully at other firms. Yet when those stellar candidates make it to a new firm, they quickly learn that their skills in the areas where they excel are no longer needed or valued. Having a thoughtful job description and a solid definition of expectations is a must.

How will the reporting process work?

Years ago, firm leaders used to believe that marketing was a function that was not integral to the practice. They often established large marketing committees or created a marketing partner role. After realizing that often those who self-selected to become marketing partners were likely looking to aggrandize their own careers, the paradigm shifted. Most firms these days have their CMO report to a chairman or to an executive director with previous management experience and proven capability. Agreeing on the proper reporting arrangement and processes for honest performance feedback is a must for the CMO relationship to work.

What is the firm's onboarding process?

First impressions matter, and the same is true with how a CMO or any new employee experiences a firm. Onboarding is underrated at many professional service firms, but it can be a significant step in ensuring a CMO's success. Make sure to have an agreed upon plan to introduce the CMO to partners and staff with whom they will be working. Discuss their budget and any approval processes in the early days of their being hired. Make them part of the firm by integrating them immediately into long-term projects with other members of the C-suite and the partners. By making them part of the team and showing them the firm is committed to them, chances are, they will reciprocate by doing an admirable job.

CMO candidates have various levels of experience, capabilities and approaches. Hiring the right one should not be a game of musical chairs.

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