

How Firm Marketing Leaders Can Shake Up the Law Firm “Caste System”

Article By:

Debra Pickett

Marketing professionals and other non-lawyers are all too familiar with the age-old hierarchy that pervades law firms and treats attorneys differently from everyone else. Reminiscent of a caste system, this throwback aspect of law firm culture offers attorneys and staff two separate benefits packages, two separate leave policies, two separate dining rooms.

While this system never could have been called equitable, a few professional generations ago firm leadership could provide an understandable justification for it. Law firm staff worked a predictable nine-to-five schedule, while the lawyers put in hundreds more hours per year, working many “all-nighters.” Lawyers’ jobs were highly specialized, while the firm’s non-lawyers performed administrative tasks that were not central to generating revenue.

What a difference a few decades make. Technology has changed the nature of every role within the firm, allowing lawyers to at least assert some work-life balance by working remotely while non-lawyer staff members likely spend longer hours than ever in the office. In addition, today’s forward-thinking firms have expanded the c-suite to include chief marketing officers, chief information officers and chief financial officers. [Increasingly they are also hiring internal operations managers and other pricing experts who can speak the same language as the procurement professionals GCs count on to save their companies money.](#) Each of these members of the team bring highly specialized training and skills to their role — and make a measurable impact on the bottom line. And whether managing partners genuinely value their skills, or are simply responding to client demand for their expertise, the result is the same: these professionals now have a seat at the table with clients.

Given this new reality, it no longer makes sense to cling to a law firm culture that renders non-lawyers second-class citizens. And yet old habits die hard. CMOs may finally be getting (a portion of) the respect they deserve, but what about the members of their teams who execute marketing strategy and play a crucial business development role with existing clients?

To be sure, marketing professionals still face an uphill battle in demonstrating their value to firm leaders. But the upheaval in the old system has created an opportunity for CMOs and marketing directors. With the right strategy and messaging, they can use their newfound platform to advance a discussion about firm policies and shed light on the fundamental work of non-lawyer professionals. Here are three ways to get started:

Rebrand your legal marketers as a business development team. Think carefully about how you talk about what you do when you interface with other stakeholders in the firm. Craft your messaging to emphasize the ways in which marketing directly generates revenue. For many large firms, a significant portion of new business comes from expanding engagements with existing clients, and marketers are on the front lines servicing those client relationships and creating opportunities for attorneys to sell across practices.

And make the case with data. Marketing leaders can use many available tools — from the simple to the sophisticated — to collect and process information about their campaigns and initiatives, and understand what really gets results. Firm leaders respect and respond to hard numbers that help them assess how your department is converting firm resources to new opportunities for business development.

Speak up about policies that don't pass the smell test. The broader culture is extremely sensitive to matters of diversity and equity, and while law firms may be later arrivals to this conversation, their corporate clients are paying close attention. Is the cost savings of a two-tiered benefits package (assuming there is one) really worth the potentially damaging optics of a negative news story on the firm's throwback culture? Is your diversity and inclusion initiative really embracing inclusion if only lawyers — and not professional staff members — are invited to participate? Legal marketing leaders can use the credibility they have gained to make the case for reexamining problematic policies and suggesting alternatives.

For most legal industry veterans, it's impossible to imagine law firms that don't elevate lawyers high above the rest of the staff. And while we probably won't be saying goodbye to this outdated aspect of firm culture anytime soon, the demands of the marketplace have introduced some much-needed wiggle room into long calcified roles. Don't miss this opportunity to help firm leaders appreciate the crucial contributions of legal marketers.

© 2025 Page2 Communications. All rights reserved.

National Law Review, Volume X, Number 65

Source URL: <https://natlawreview.com/article/how-firm-marketing-leaders-can-shake-law-firm-caste-system>