LAW PRACTICE
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Marketing in the COVID-19 Era

By Carol Schiro Greenwald

It's scary out there. Every day the rules change. Many of us have no active clients, while others are being overcome with clients' questions. So, what's a lawyer to do? Let's acknowledge the magnitude of this pandemic and the stressful anxiety it causes. Then let's choose: On the one hand, you can be a Chicken Little. On the other, you can take the opportunity to focus on what you can control, which is yourself, your mindset, your practice, and your relationship with clients.

When large disruptions like COVID-19 burst upon the scene they create a vacuum in everyday life. This vacuum pulls in many parts of our lives, creates chaos, and spits out a recognizable but changed reality. Anticipate this future reality. Think ahead to what you want your career and practice to be when the "new normal" arrives. In an April 2, 2020 blog post, Susan Duncan, a Strategy and Business Development Consultant at RainMaking Oasis LLC, summed up the take-charge position: "As market conditions and client's needs change, this is a time to reassess where your practice is, where it will be in six months, and how to stay visible/on the radar, relevant, appreciated and in demand."

Are you thinking about where to begin such a seemingly daunting task? Let's begin with the most important component of your practice – your clients. Here we will review ideas for staying connected, becoming reconnected, and solidifying your marketing position as the go-to lawyer in your practice area for your target clients.

STAYING IN TOUCH

The forced separation of stay-at-home restrictions has made everyone more desperate for authentic connection. This is the chance to ramp up your advisor skills and be the trusted confidante that your clients need.

Most clients value proactive advice from their lawyers. Pertinent advice puts their problems into a larger perspective, offers solutions from a different point of view, and suggests legal options that the client may not have considered.

Today, when people feel so vulnerable, shattered by the daily litany of COVID-19 cases and deaths, they may want someone to be a good ear: just listen, comfort, empathize. Just being in the trenches together solidifies the trust foundation of your relationship.

Outreach becomes the thrust of your basic business development program. Begin by creating a planned approach to client touches:

- Why are you doing this?
- Whom should you call first?
- What is the rationale behind your prioritization?
- How many will you call every day?
  - Will you connect via telephone or videoconferences?
  - What will the setting be?
- What is the content of your basic outreach?
  - How will you customize your points to make them appropriate to each person?
- What will your follow-up be?
- How will you define success?

WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?

It is important to return to your goals before embarking on a major business development initiative. Write down what you want to communicate about yourself and your practice. Consider if you want to offer any of your expertise for free to specific client or community segments.

Think about how you want the person on the other end of the call to respond. How do you want them to feel afterwards?

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WHOM SHOULD YOU CALL FIRST?

You will want to segment your clients into tranches. Possible segments include favorite people you work with, "80/20" clients, newest clients, clients in an area you want to expand, and inactive clients. You may want to create a call list that is tied to the subject matter of your practice area, i.e., learn from the first people you speak to and pass those learnings on in subsequent calls.

WHAT IS THE RATIONALE BEHIND YOUR PRIORITIZATION?

Tie the connect sequence back to your goals for growth in 2021. Think about how hard this will be for you to do. If you think you want to practice with people who can help you come across in a positive way, call clients who are friends. If you are confident that these calls will be easy to do, begin with the most important ones.

HOW MANY WILL YOU CALL EVERY DAY? HOW WILL YOU CONNECT?

One of the most important practices to put in place during this strange time is a daily schedule. Working from home can blur the lines between work and play. By setting distinct periods for each activity, you can restore some of the stability you took for granted in your pre-COVID-19 routine.

You may want to use the phone for some clients but suggest videoconferences with others. You may also want to add in a bit of networking and suggest a three- or four-person videoconference coffee. You can then invite people with similar concerns or suggest that you each invite another person whom you think would be of interest to both of you.

WHAT IS THE CONTENT OF YOUR BASIC OUTREACH? HOW WILL YOU CUSTOMIZE YOUR POINTS TO MAKE THEM APPROPRIATE FOR EACH PERSON?

As a client advisor and confidante, you will want to connect with them where they are, i.e., "walk a mile in their shoes." Begin by asking about them, their situation, their hopes and fears, their most pressing concerns. Ask how you can help them. Sometimes just a shoulder to lean on is enough; other times they will have a specific need you can fill.

One employment lawyer says her daily calls personalize these dreadful times as she watches tragedy happen to her clients. Rules are changing so fast it leads to uncertainty that ends in frustration as people try to meet the changing environment. Another lawyer, calling former small business clients to see how they are, has uncovered so many business-breaking problems that she is working with them at no charge.

WHAT WILL YOUR FOLLOW-UP BE?

Think ahead to follow-up options. Obviously, you will want to note any important information about the client in your contacts database. If this is a program, it should have what marketers call "strings"; that is, it should not be a one-shot deal. Think about asking clients if they would like another check-in call in a few weeks. Invite them to a videoconference, webinar or roundtable focused on their issues. Of course, use your own expertise to help them move forward or make introductions to other professionals who can be of assistance.

HOW WILL YOU DEFINE SUCCESS?

After a call, success could be the good feeling you will have after an authentic connection. Or immediate work to resolve clients' problems, or the sense that you have solidified a relationship.

After producing auxiliary marketing materials you may define success in terms of the number of people who read or comment on each piece, or what you feel is a growing appreciation of your expertise within your client base and among connections in the larger community.

AUXILIARY ACTIVITIES

You should think about adding thought leader content to your touch plan. When creating this auxiliary piece, again go back to your goals and make a plan. Planning will help you to keep focused on your brand: how you want people to view you. It becomes a funnel to distill topics that can position you as a solution from the myriad stories that appear every day. Then take the time to drill down into the details so that what you offer will showcase your substantive knowledge, professional attention to detail, and understanding of your clients' needs going forward.

Content can appear in new blog posts, white papers, client advisories, and/or videos. Content could feature:

- Answers to recurring issues uncovered in your client calls.
- Your take on the relevance of new guidelines, laws, and regulations to your client base. Show how each new imperative will impact your clients.
- Sharing interesting articles with appropriate segments of your client base. Personalize the contact with an introductory note explaining why you are sending it and which parts are most applicable to them.
- Interview experts on topics of interest of your client base. Ask the interviewee to share the interview with his or her contact list.

Maximize your visibility beyond your clients by posting your outreach on LinkedIn, Facebook, and any other online sites favored by your colleagues, prospects, and clients. Bring up the subjects in videoconference networking meetings.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

A client touch program can create a platform for "new normal" growth in many ways. It can guide restructuring and prioritization of your practice offerings to meet the immediate needs of clients emerging from this crisis. It will certainly help you answer your emotional need to connect in meaningful ways and, hopefully by connecting, reinforce their concept of you as their trusted advisor.

The auxiliary materials you produce will strengthen and expand your brand in the marketplace. It will keep you in front of people who can make introductions for you, hire you, and support you.

Think of the program as an easy way to keep in touch with people you care about while showcasing your human side and your professional expertise. Go forth, connect, learn, and relish the good feelings that come from helping others.