

How Senior Marketing Professionals Can Transition to the Legal World

By Erika Steinberg

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Andi Benjamin has seen the marketing universe from just about all its sides. “I have been in marketing since the late 70s. I started with Budget Rent a Car Corporation. In 1979, their parent, Transamerica Corporation brought me in as Director of Communications, where I worked with companies like United Artists, Transamerica Airlines, and financial services groups.” Benjamin added, “I pivoted to emerging growth companies and was the first head of communications for Activision when it was founded, then President of the first AI entertainment software company. As a strategic marketing consultant, I worked with technology, entertainment, transportation and professional services companies at all stages. I started focusing on legal marketing in 1988.”

“It’s been extremely helpful to have other industries to draw on,” she says. “I’ve brought concepts from other sectors (and still do) to such firms as Morrison Foerster, Latham & Watkins, Pillsbury and Fasken to instigate creative thinking about strategic positioning and different ways to connect effectively with targets. I’ve not only applied best practices

from other industries but brought in people, too; I’ve hired many from outside the legal profession to work in-house in my teams or as my replacement.”

There can be a downside to crossing the “legal line,” Benjamin

says. “I have seen people come from outside and get chewed up and spit out by lawyers. Other businesses embrace unique approaches. For the most part, most law firms have a restricted way of thinking—after all, they have a rather small universe of competitors—and often, they all end up mimicking one another.

“Legal marketing, just like the law itself, is largely based on precedent. When they ask someone to bring in best practices from other industries and cultures, it’s hard because if the lawyers don’t get in your way as you try something new, the administrators sometimes will. For the most part, firms are often more concerned about internal politics than external outreach.” It can be tough for an outsider who



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thought they were brought in for their multi-dimensional experience and expertise.

Benjamin is not alone in finding her way to legal marketing after years or even decades in other kinds of marketing. A few lessons follow, based on interviews with some leaders in the industry, about why and how to make the transition. Four senior professionals from legal marketing talked about the differences that make their “new” roles in the law different from their previous marketing roles. For all of them, lawyers challenge and engage them; they’re smart, creative thinkers, and they take a real interest in how their practices and law firms are exhibited to the public and to prospective clients. The specifics vary, but each has something to teach from her or his history and experience.

The Client Survey That Wasn’t

Roy Sexton is immediate past president of the Legal Marketing Association (LMA) International Board of Directors. LMA is the single largest trade group for legal marketing professionals, with nearly 4,000 members. In his “day job” as Director of Marketing for international law firm Clark Hill out of Detroit, Sexton has been able to integrate deftly his experiences from a prior career in consumer-facing healthcare marketing with those from two prior smaller firms.

“I came from a large hospital system and my first law job was at a small mortgage foreclosure firm in 2011, and they seemed very marketing-savvy there. At the time, I thought healthcare had a lot to learn, but a basic tool—the customer survey—was commonly used.”

But Sexton says that when he came to that mortgage foreclosure law firm, a logical, basic

notion like regularly surveying clients was still an alien concept.

“I worked out a survey of clients with the managing partner and sent it out. The executive committee first heard about it when it was complete, and I came into their meeting to report the results. They were shocked, and they had a few questions:

‘On what authority I had decided to send this client survey? Who had reviewed these questions?’

I candidly pointed to the managing partner, who conveniently, was not in the room.

‘Why didn’t you include us?’

I noted that even though it seemed I had inadvertently missed out on some protocol, it had produced some valuable client feedback.

Answer: ‘We won’t be doing anything with it because we didn’t know about it and we don’t like the way you wrote the survey.’

I replied that we had created client expectations to hear back from us—after all, we had asked them their opinions. And the committee said, ‘Well, that’s your problem. You’re marketing.’

To me, the survey represented valuable data. To them, it was a perilous risk, laced with criticism. They weren’t having any. I learned about buy-in that day; I haven’t forgotten. Everyone needs to feel like they are in the driver’s seat until they don’t feel like driving the car anymore. I’m grateful for those early learnings which have served me well as I’ve progressed to larger firms.”

Budgets Come First

Susan Kurz, Chief Marketing and Client Development Officer at Calfee, Halter & Griswold LLP in Cincinnati, said, “My first job out of col-

lege was at a PR firm where I helped to edit and proofread newsletters for law firm practices. That began to teach me about this new world.”

Kurz thinks sophistication about finance and budgeting is a big plus, and not an area of expertise often found in a law firm marketing department. “I had considerable experience managing a budget, which is an asset for a midsize firm especially,” she says. In another realm, she finds people who come from particular sectors “may better understand what client service truly means.”

“I’ve also seen that see people from the world of other services or even tech marketing may do better in the law firm environment than those who come from product marketing. And having emotional intelligence skills such as patience, curiosity and diplomacy is crucial,” Kurz adds.

Cynthia McCollough worked outside law firms, primarily in tech, then in-house at two law firms—Dickstein Shapiro and Buckley—before opening her own consulting practice. She said technology was and remains a place of opportunity for legal marketers.

“Introducing new marketing technology tools can raise concern among naturally risk-averse law firm leadership, but these, of course, are customary to firms like Oracle and Microsoft, which were always hungry to leverage the explosive growth in tech.”

“By the time I got to law firms, I was used to identifying and implementing marketing tools that helped my department improve efficiency, deliverables, and decision-making.” She says lawyers can sometimes be wary of these new tools, and it takes patience and ongoing

communication about their value to overcome some of these hurdles.

“When we talked about ‘audience marketing’ outside the law firm world, it was just another way of thinking about customer experience. I worked with teams to understand our clients’ pain points and requirements, then developed go-to-market strategies based on varying client needs and preferences. Being able to develop programs to clearly communicate value to different kinds of clients is a translatable skill in any position,” McCollough said.

First Person View

My own experience, developed over nearly three decades in the business, is that the unique partnership structure of law firms, and the politics that can come with a flat structure, can be the biggest challenge to new arrivals from outside the legal industry. Law firm partners sometimes do not think institutionally—that’s OUR job. But don’t assume that every firm is the same. Every law firm has its own personality, and your assignment, should you choose to accept it, is to find the law firm “personality” and culture that matches your own and to build trust, confidence and (sometimes) lifelong relationships with lawyers, professional staff and other stakeholders alike.

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