

# Building a Better Practice through Marketing and Management

## The *Ultimate Success Environment* for Lawyers

### (...and 1 Slightly *Radical* New Year's Resolution)

At the beginning of every new year, you make the same ole' worn out promises to yourself. This will be the year you get rid of the love handles around your waist, join a gym and work out like a warrior or just maybe quit smoking. There's a good chance you make at least one or two of these resolutions at the start of every new year, but once February rolls around, you get busy at work, stuff happens and before you know it, your New Year's resolutions are a distant memory.

#### **Simplify Your Life by Eliminating the Stuff You Hate**

Just think, what are the two or three things in your law practice (or personal life) that you just can't stand? You should have a list of all the things you don't like in your life. Now, eliminate them! Well, not completely—you delegate and assign these tasks to someone within your firm (or outsource them) and now your life just became a whole lot simpler.

Let's start with something as simple as mowing the lawn. For \$10 an hour you can hire the local teenager in your neighborhood to mow the lawn. Is your time worth more than \$10/hour—you're damn right it is and so why the hell are you mowing the lawn? If your time is worth \$500-\$1,000 an hour, you should NEVER mow your own lawn.

Now, take this one step further. Do you spend time every week picking up laundry or grocery shopping? Yes, the stuff you think everyone does, but let's face it, this is a terrible use of your time. For \$10/hour, you can hire a stay-at-home mom to do these things for you (*Craig's List* is a great resource for hiring assistants), and in one foul swoop you just crossed off these tasks from the "stuff" that gets in the way of your "real" work.

"If you don't have an assistant, you are one."

Jack Daly, *Hyper Sales Growth*

Now let's take a closer look at your law practice: What are the tasks that you hate and don't make money for you? For most lawyers, the low-payoff activities include fielding phone calls from clients and responding to email and letters. Now eliminate these activities by assigning a paralegal or assistant to answer your phone calls, respond to letters and emails and update your clients about the status of their case (if you think you have to be "the guy" doing this, you're kidding yourself!). Your life just got a whole lot easier...and you just became a helluva lot more productive.

You must always ask yourself: *How can I make more money with less work?* This means, if you can assign or delegate a task, you MUST. It is never okay to think that you can do the task quicker or better than your paralegal—this is precisely the type of thinking that will keep you bogged down in the endless flow of "urgent" emails, phone calls and letters. Perfection is the enemy—good enough is good enough...at least it is if you ever want to get home for dinner every once in a while.

### **A Crash Course in Time Management**

Peter Drucker, the management guru, has a novel technique for evaluating your time management skills. Drucker suggests that you keep a record of your time—that's right, document how you are spending your time in five or ten minute blocks. Try this for just a day—that's it, and then look back to see how you spent your time.

"If you watch the minutes, the years will take care of themselves."

Benjamin Franklin

It's amazing how much time we all spend on totally useless activities (hey, I'm guilty too). You might spend a few minutes scanning email as they hit your inbox and then respond to an email or two that you think are urgent and before you know it, it's time for lunch. Your whole morning is shot.

By keeping track of where you spend your time, you will be amazed how much time is wasted in your day. And even better, you will force yourself to confront the fact that you are constantly being redirected from one activity to the next depending on the non-stop emails, phone calls and interruptions from your staff.

### **Plan out Every Day by the Minute**

Time blocks are a great way of taking control of your day. If you're not setting your own agenda by allocating every minute of your day to specific tasks, you will just be a puppet responding to someone else's agenda.

Try allocating all of the time in your workday to specific tasks and then put this in your schedule, just like a court appointment or deposition. Do not accept any unscheduled phone calls—that's right, no phone calls, no emails and no interruptions! Anything that is going to happen is prescheduled in advance. With this system, you shouldn't have to manage interruptions because if you do it the right way, there will be none.

"Your goal as an entrepreneur is to find a better way to leverage your time."

Scott Manning, MBA

Your goal is to structure your work day to eliminate interruptions. The worst interruptions are NOT the constant barrage of "urgent" phone calls, emails and letters—no, the biggest offenders are your staff who ask to pick your mind "just for a second". But you can't give in even once because this tiny interruption to your day just took an hour and when you're done, you can't even remember what you were doing before.

Unless you are controlling the agenda for your workday, someone else will. And by structuring your agenda for a day by focusing only on your highest payoff activities, you will accomplish only your agenda—not someone else's. Now, you're working with no interruptions and doing only the work on your "A" cases.

### **The 80/20 Rule for Lawyers**

Now you've got a system for eliminating interruptions—wonderful! But you're flooded with dozens, or hundreds, and maybe thousands of cases and you don't know where to focus your time and energy. Never forget: 80% of your income is derived from 20% of your cases (it's probably closer to 90%/10%, but let's not be too picky).

Before you begin, you hand-pick the 5 biggest cases you have—let's call them your "A" cases. Regardless of how you label your best cases, you must identify them and then focus your time on your "A" cases and neglect the others. That's right, *all cases are NOT created equal*. You have cases

right now that you know are worth high six figures or more, and they must always be on the top of your list.

If you're spending your time on small value cases, it doesn't matter how hard you work—you'll be working crazy hours and still trying to figure out why you're struggling.

### **A Game Plan for Success**

Have you ever seen a football team that doesn't have a playbook? Of course not! The head coach has a playbook because he wants to make sure the players know what is expected of them and what they must do. Sounds pretty basic, but why would you, a lawyer, put your team "on the field" without a playbook?

Whenever a new issue is brought to your attention, you should ask: How likely is it that this issue will come up again? If the issue is likely to recur, you should make a written policy or system. With a system or policy in place, your staff won't have to guess what they're supposed to do—they'll already know with explicit systems and policies that describe exactly what is supposed to be done for almost every situation. No more excuses from your staff and now everyone is on the same page.

Where do you get started? An employment manual doesn't have to be the *Magna Carta*—just 5-10 pages of your basic office rules and voila! You've got a game plan for success. And if you want a quick start, send an email to my trusty paralegal, Corina Skidmore, at [cskidmore@fishermalpracticelaw.com](mailto:cskidmore@fishermalpracticelaw.com) and she will email our office manual in Word format. You have my explicit permission to copy as much, or as little, of our office manual as you want.

### **Your Immediate Goal for 2015**

Do not implement all of these changes all at once—you will go crazy. Just take one or two action items and give them a shot. Maybe your one thing will be the creation of an employment manual or perhaps you will begin time blocking your day. But most important—take action! Hey, you won't know if anyone of this works without giving it a try.

Here's to your success in 2015!