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A “12-Step Program” for Marketing ADR Professionals

By Judy Bodenhamer

You did not go to law school to study marketing. However, you know you should be doing *something* in the way of marketing and promoting yourself and your services to potential clients.

Yes, your time and resources are precious, and you may view anything above and beyond doing your legal and ADR work as a nuisance. Yet marketing, advertising, and public relations are vital to maintaining and growing your client base and are the necessary evils of doing business. Word-of-mouth referrals and simply trusting the relationships you have built with your current clients are not enough to sustain and increase your business portfolio.

My company works with attorneys and business professionals by helping them grow their practices. For more than a decade, I have specifically worked with mediators to launch and grow their practices. The key to developing a marketing program to help grow your practice is simply to get started.

The initial step of the classic 12-step program is admitting the existence of a problem. If you admit that

you could do more to market your practice, then you have already started the journey to improving it. Following the steps outlined here will guide you on that journey and help you strengthen your relationships with current and potential clients and add value to your firm’s name and services.

Step 1—Determine Your Niche

Realize that you cannot be all things to all people. Do not be a generalist who believes you can fulfill everyone’s needs. The key to success is doing some soul searching and determining what you are *good* at doing, what you *like* doing, and what *type* of client you like doing it for. If it is not immediately evident to you, ask a colleague or trusted friend how they would rank your strengths and weaknesses.

Take a look at the list of your current client base and ask yourself some questions: Do they fall into any certain business category, size of organization, or some other grouping? Is there a common thread that connects your clients together? Use the expertise you already have in specific areas and build on the strengths you already possess.

Step 2—Identify Your Ideal Client

Pretend that you have a box of building toys that would allow you to construct the perfect client complete with every personality and emotional trait imaginable. Which items would you choose? What makes a perfect client in your opinion? Where can you find them? What media do they follow? To what associations and boards do they belong? In which geographical areas are they located?

Make a list of 20 ideal clients. Figure out what they care about, the affiliations to which they belong, and what they value in an ADR provider. Find out how you can *specifically* fill their needs without falling into the traps that weigh many businesses down— cliché and canned responses, lists of generic services, tired literature, and so forth. Determine the needs of your clients and demonstrate unique ways to fill those needs.

Step 3—Understand Basic Business Practices

As mentioned above, you did not go to law school to study marketing . . . or business. Do you know how to read a spreadsheet and understand the terms mentioned on it? Do you appreciate how to run an office effectively? What does it take to choose the ideal candidates for the support positions in your firm? Which tasks, if any, can be outsourced? Which tasks should be conducted solely in house?

Understanding basic business practices will both provide you with self-confidence and give your clients increased confidence in your abilities.

In addition to a specific marketing plan, you will benefit from having thorough strategic business and financial plans in writing. If you have these items in place already, review the plans for timeliness and relevancy. Do these documents still relay pertinent information and coincide with your mission statement and core beliefs?

If you do not have these documents in place, now is the time to assemble them. Either commit yourself to the creation of them or hire an experienced business coach to create them for you. Fully comprehend the business strategies and financial realities of your practice, so you know what portion of your time and earnings can be allotted toward marketing activities.

Step 4—Review Your Current Marketing Activities

“I love the way my name appears in the phone book and how my website pops up when I Google my business name!” Can you say that with confidence?

What are you doing now to promote yourself and your services? Do you use advertisements, printed literature, or a website? Do you routinely update these items and ensure they have consistent language and a similar look? What do you do to announce new products, business offerings, or staff to your current or potential clients?

Pretend that you are someone who is looking for a mediator in the area. Where would you begin your

search—a referral, a professional organization listing, the Internet, or the phone book? Or is there another avenue?

If in doubt, go to the source by routinely providing your current clients with ways to garner their feedback of your services. Written surveys, email follow-up, and even a phone call at the completion of a project will allow you to answer any questions or concerns they may have regarding your firm. The feedback from them will also assist you in honing your marketing messages and specifying your niche.

Ask objective colleagues, friends, or (most importantly) clients to give you their initial thoughts and honest opinions regarding the look and messages they see when they look at your business collateral.

Step 5—Dream It!

You know the saying, “Where do you want to be in 5 or 10 years?” Well, have you ever taken the time to *really* determine the answer for yourself? Meditate on that thought and picture yourself a decade older. What is your job like? Are you working more hours, or fewer? What type of clients does your firm serve? What income are you making? Are you no longer working and living the retirement dream? Determine what your goals are in order to figure out how to reach them. The same is true for your marketing goals.

Once you know what you want to do and where you want to go, you need to determine the road map for how you will get there.

The key is to streamline and prioritize your marketing plan so it is unique and fits you and your organization. Using a template or another organization’s plan as a starting point is fine, but you still need to customize your plan to make it exclusively yours.

Although it would be wonderful to roll out a full-scale advertising and public relations plan—complete with paid advertising, glossy brochures, weekly newsletters, glitzy website, and billboard advertising—you must ask yourself if that is realistic. Would it even serve your purposes and be noticed by those target audiences you are attempting to reach?

Develop and define your organization’s marketing goals and what actions you are capable of making with the amount of time, personnel, and budget you currently have available.



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Step 6—Make a Plan

We are all dreamers at heart with lofty goals and wishes. Writing those dreams down is the first tangible step toward turning those dreams into a reality.

The process of putting a marketing plan in writing forces the person preparing the plan to look at the business in an objective and critical manner. The plan needs to define your organization's purpose, your competition, your management, and your personnel. The process of constructing a business plan can be a strong reality check.

A good marketing plan will be your practice's bible for all of your mass communication activities. It will guide you in your advertising purchases and public relations tactics and ensure that every member of your firm communicates the same messages both internally and externally.

Understanding basic business practices will both provide you with self-confidence and give your clients increased confidence in your abilities.

The plan should include action items that are measurable with set objectives and specified target audiences. Each action needs to be evaluated for its effectiveness and how it contributes to the overall brand of the firm.

Make your marketing plan a living, dynamic document that is regularly reviewed and updated monthly to reflect market-influencing trends to help you make the most of new opportunities.

Step 7—Determine Your Marketing Strategy

A is where you are now. C is where you want to be. The question now is to determine "B"—the specific step-by-step tasks that you need to do to reach your marketing goals.

In today's fast-moving, highly technological business environment, keeping up with all of the media avenues that are available is a daunting task. Do you know if you need to have a presence on the web besides your website? What about using social media, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, or even an iPhone app? What makes sense for you and where you want to be?

If you are uncertain where to begin, you could always

start by analyzing your competitors' marketing strategies to learn how they reach the market. If their strategy is working, consider adopting a similar plan. Determine if the media they use is a proper fit for your organization or if there is room for improvement. The most effective marketing strategies typically integrate multiple media or promotional strategies to reach the market.

Some specific areas of your marketing communications strategy could include direct mail, trade shows, public relations; editorial boards; public speaking; promotional collateral; and advertising in television, radio, print, and the web. Specify which marketing communications tactics are a good fit for your organization, your firm's budget, and the message you are trying to communicate.

Step 8—Harvest Strategic Relationships

You already know many people. Whether your relationships are professional, personal, in their infancy, or time-tested, consider all of the names you know. Pull out your Rolodex, Outlook, and Blackberry and give them a thorough viewing—clients, colleagues, and even suppliers or vendors. Your organization already has developed relationships with scores of people.

After you list those individuals, determine whose business acumen you admire. Ask yourself who can assist you in your marketing endeavors and with whom you can develop a strategic relationship. Whether it is an email, phone call, lunch, or an invitation to a benefit, you need to make yourself known to them. At a minimum, communicate with those on the list once a month.

Use these strategic relationships as an extension of your business. They can act as a voice to current clients, as a reference to potential new clients, and as a mentor when you need to make critical business decisions. Identify and nurture your strategic relationships by routinely connecting with them.

Step 9—Do It Today!

Now that you proudly have your written marketing plan in hand, what do you do now? The answer is simple: put it into action!

Some marketing programs will require detailed action plans; others will not. Some tasks are no-brainers—start and completion dates may be sufficient. If, however, your marketing tactics are unfamiliar or complex, then an action plan could save your sanity.

Your action plan should include a description of the program, reference to the general marketing strategy it supports, a budget, the person accountable for the project's completion, and a time line.

If you ever feel as if your plan isn't meeting your marketing goals, simply change to a new path. As long as you are upholding the basic tenets of consistency in message and target audience, you can't go wrong.

The absolute fastest way of destroying all of your good

planning and marketing momentum is to do nothing at all. Yes, you will need to devote some time to take your firm to the next level. If you don't have the time or simply don't want to devote your time to seeing your marketing plan through, then hire someone. Whether it is an internal position or a paid consultant, you will greatly benefit from having someone who is devoted to maintaining consistency in your messages and brand image. Determine who will take responsibility for each tactic, what the time line will be, who the target audience is, and how the effectiveness of your message will be measured.

What makes sense for you and where you want to be?

Step 10—Get Out of the Office

It's easy to get into the habit of sitting behind a desk, but will that grow your practice? Literally meet your potential new clients by attending community events, taking an active role in professional organizations, and looking for speaking opportunities that will put you in front of people.

Clients like to see that mediators and attorneys are active members of their communities and confident speakers. Once you make the connection with a potential client, invest the time in really getting to know them and understanding their business and specific circumstances.

Put yourself in front of as many potential clients as possible and in a position of authority by being seen at professional events and speaking engagements.

Step 11—Consistently Communicate Your Message

You can't be all things to all people, and your message can't vary. What are the top three things potential clients should know about you and your firm's services? How are these messages woven into all of your business literature, advertising, and talking points? What is your organization's brand? What is your practice known for providing?

Branding is not about getting your target market to choose you over the competition, but rather about getting your prospects to see you as the only one that provides the right solution to their problem.

Develop no more than three key points that will identify your firm's brand. Use these points as talking points when conversing with potential clients or during speaking engagements, in written literature about

your practice, and even in your advertised messages. Determine what your top messages are, how you will communicate them, and how regularly you will disseminate them.

Step 12—Reroute When Necessary

If you find yourself going down the wrong path, simply turn around. Nothing about marketing or business development is set in stone. If a certain tactic doesn't work for you, fails to reach your target audience, or is simply too expensive for your bottom line, then try something different.

Do one new activity a day—write a letter, send an email, conduct a client satisfaction survey, or make a phone call. Even just one small step will eventually lead you to new beginnings. Have fun with your marketing, let your creative side shine, and change course when necessary.

If you are uncertain as to how you will carry out the specific tasks or would rather not dedicate the time to them, then hire a knowledgeable professional who will guide you and focus your marketing activities.

Lastly, the Serenity Prayer used by another 12-step program, Alcoholics Anonymous, asks for the acceptance of things that cannot be changed, the courage to change the things that can be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference. The marketing of your firm and growth of your practice is something that can easily be changed, you have the wisdom to do it, and now it's time to be courageous and make it happen. ♦

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