

## Running To the Car: What Lawyers Can Learn from Other Businesses

*By Joe Calloway*

For many years there was a billboard near Louisville, Kentucky, that said, "Tattoo Charlie's—Done While You Wait." Tattoo Charlie was having fun with his advertising. Obviously all tattoos are done "while you wait."

But there's a serious lesson here for every business and every lawyer. The marketplace, meaning your clients and potential clients, sees you as a commodity. Lawyers, to many, are pretty much all alike. All lawyers pretty much do the same things. Until you differentiate yourself from your competition, you are a commodity.

A law practice depends on its customers to survive. While there are no secrets to success in business, there are patterns. Market leaders in every field and profession tend to have a few practices and attributes in common. Albert Einstein once said, "I have no particular talents, but I am passionately curious." To learn what it takes to create a successful law practice, today's lawyer need only look with focused curiosity at what successful companies are doing.

The number-one-ranked company on *Fortune* magazine's "2010 Most Admired Companies in the World" list is Apple®. What can a lawyer learn from Apple that she can apply to her practice? Plenty.

Most people would say that Apple's greatest strength as a company is innovation. But Apple invents, designs, and manufactures high technology. Do lawyers need to innovate? Only if they intend to survive as a business.

Innovation means, in the simplest terms, doing something better. And it does not just apply to manufacturing. It has equal importance in terms of the quality of relationships. Apple innovated the retail experience in several ways. Almost without exception, scheduled appointments are honored on time. Are your clients provided with a disciplined approach that respects their time? Apple's sales staff explain their products in language that is meaningful and understandable to the customer. Attorneys are famous for using indecipherable jargon. Do you communicate with your clients in a way that they can understand? Do you make difficult legal concepts simple so that clients can be effective in their own representation? Apple strives to put the customer at ease about intimidating technology. The legal system is, at least, equally intimidating. Do you explain the process sufficiently to make your client feel in control?

Perhaps my favorite and most universally useful example of a business practice that should be "cross-pollinated" everywhere is found in a chain of tire stores. If you find yourself driving in the northwestern United States and see a Les Schwab Tire Centers store, pull into the parking lot. A Les Schwab employee will run out to your car. Not walk. Run. Not some stores. All of them. Running to the car is something for which Les Schwab is known.

Les Schwab sells a commodity: tires. There is not much difference between comparably priced tires. Some might say the same about lawyers. What makes the difference is the human connection. It is an intentional, designed gesture that separates Les Schwab from the competition.

What is your version of running to the car? Do you greet every client in the lobby and offer the person a drink? When you answer a call do you make the caller feel like the most important person in your world?

Spend just two weeks looking for ideas that can improve your practice. Many companies provide excellent examples. Do you match focused efficiency combined with a delightful customer experience like Southwest Airlines®? Can you differentiate your practice because of your business's culture and values like Ritz-Carlton®? Do you give your clients one less thing to worry about through absolute consistency of performance like FedEx®? The best idea for your law practice will very likely not come from copying another lawyer's ideas. Look beyond your everyday world. Great ideas are everywhere.

Aspire to create the best service experience when compared to any business. Many law firms rely solely on word-of-mouth advertising. In building one of the most successful Internet companies ever, Zappos.com spent no money on advertising. Their entire marketing plan was to do one thing: create customers so satisfied that they would spread the word about this wonderful company. Zappos succeeded. Are your clients so satisfied that your business can rely solely on word-of-mouth advertising?

Your next best ideas are all around you. Like Einstein, be passionately curious. Always learn. Always improve.

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