

Marketing partner

Nobody who works in a private partnership can escape the significance or influence of partners. No matter how large or small the practice, no matter how young or old the partner, no matter whether they are in a management role or not: all count. Mutual partnership means that all partners feel as though they own a piece of the firm and have both a stake and a voice in its future. Anyone working in marketing or BD must elicit their support if they are to influence policy or, indeed, get anything done.

It is extremely rare for functional specialists to join the leadership of these firms and to engage in these intimate discussions about policy. Normal behaviour is to have 'marketing directors' running aspects of the function but these, although highly rewarded, do not have the status, influence or decision making authority of, say, chief marketing officers in public corporations. Excluded from the real dialogue of the organisation's top leadership, marketing specialists are normally limited to tactical work in support of partners. 'Go to market' strategy and client relationships are jealously owned by partners and the influence of marketing specialists in significant strategies is negligible.

From time to time, though, 'marketing partners' have been appointed in practices across the professions. These have normally been extrovert partners from the professional discipline of the firm that are stepping into a little management experience as part of their career development. The role varies but it can include issues like sector emphasis, acquisitions, client management plans and the handling of sensitive PR glitches.

Yet something has changed in the past few years. I can now, without effort, think of several marketing partners in different parts of the world who are qualified marketers, recruited by managing partners after a more significant contribution from the function. Why? And what difference does this make? What does it mean if the marketing leader in a practice is a marketing qualified specialist rather than an accountant, lawyer, consultant or architect? Is there a difference between the influence and scope of, say, a BD director and a marketing leader with full partner status?

It seems there is. I spoke to several people in this role when preparing this column. Alan Evans, for instance, is the marketing partner of accountants BDO; he joined them after a spell as a marketing director at PwC and, before that, a career in largely financial services marketing. He says that moving into partnership prompts a significant "mental shift"; that you become "a careful custodian of investment".

One of the most significant differences seems to be the importance of 'judgment'. It is taken for granted that these people are experts in their field; that they have knowledge of effective growth strategies. To engage at this level you have to have a world class grasp of the technical aspects of your subject. But true expertise is something more than technical knowledge. It is the acquired judgment that comes from the application of technique, talent and process to a business environment. In the harsh, demanding and immediate debate of a partner meeting, marketing partners need to respond convincingly with a robust, clear and credible approach which will work there and then. They must use their marketing perspectives to structure and mould approaches which are already remarkably successful.

I grow increasingly impatient with the piffle put out by consultants, writers and employees of professional service firms who have never been partners. The tendency to talk about leaders of these fabulously successful businesses as if they are educationally sub-normal in sales, marketing or even social (networking) skills is bizarre. Most partners are sophisticated people who routinely handle concept upon concept. During their careers many will have sat through presentations on marketing or read books about sales; and understand where marketing and BD people are coming from. They are, though, frequently too busy, too impatient, too rich or, sometimes, too polite, to explain how irrelevant and inappropriate much marketing output can be.

With roots in consumer product manufacturing, many of the concepts promulgated in undergraduate and CIM courses are simply irrelevant. Staggeringly few academic research projects into professional services marketing have included partners in their sample; an omission that would not occur in any other industry. As a result, quite a number of the assertions about BD or marketing simply do not make sense at partner level. Take, for example, the much overused term 'rainmaker'. These driven people do exist in all professions and they bring in remarkable amounts of revenue. I know one, for example, in the search industry. Whereas the average number of top-flight searches a year is around thirteen, this person once delivered a hundred. Her managing partner simply describes her as a "phenomenon". But most rainmakers are erratic, demanding individuals who have not the slightest idea how exactly they perform this remarkable feat; and many cause real difficulty for their colleagues. It is not possible to build a stable business around their behaviours or to extrapolate generic learning from their approach.

The professions include some of the most successful businesses the world has seen. Many practices earn two to three times the net margins of the clients they serve and are well into their second century of doing so. Moreover, the industry contains some of the world's most successful business brands (like McKinsey, Deloitte, Clifford Chance etc) and, through its work or thought leadership, has influence well beyond its size. Many of the partners who lead it are first rate intuitive marketers who have used concepts like viral marketing, relationship management, innovation and thought leadership for many decades; even if they do not call them that. I have seen tools like the Ansoff matrix, the directional policy matrix and scenario planning used in discussions amongst partners of various different firms without a single marketing person being involved.

When they join the debate, though, good marketing partners can influence this successful intuitive insight by structuring approaches and influencing policy. They are able to both increase revenue and make business generation more efficient, contributing to margin.

Lady Randolph Churchill told her son "Do business darling, only at the top". Marketers who are not at partner level need to tune their ears to the whispered echoes of the partnership debate and win a voice by producing practical, relevant programmes. Those who are now taking their seats at the table might, if they can hack it, help us all by sponsoring thought leadership about how this remarkably successful business model actually goes to market.

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