

Surviving partnerships

Partnerships are exciting, liberating and professionally fulfilling for partners. For others they can be very difficult indeed. No editor would, for instance, consider dedicating an edition of a magazine to “surviving plcs”. What is it about partners and partnerships that makes them stressful, frustrating and challenging ...especially for support staff? What can that mean for someone trying to do a BD job or looking to develop a serious career in professional service marketing?

The difficulties arise from the reason for their success: the unique ownership structure of professional practices. As each partner is an owner of the business, each rightly feels they have a view on its direction and policies. Nor do they think they should necessarily tow-the-party-line. So, working with them in a marketing or BD role involves some unique challenges.

First, win a voice

Any new practice marketer should set out to handle practical activities well. These will normally be ad hoc ideas initiated by partners between client projects. No matter how famous or big the firm, new arrivals will find that some will not have been properly planned. Others will be muddle-headed initiatives which fly in the face of market realities or, worse, will be expensive pet projects which have been running for years with little effect.

A good practice marketer can tackle these issues and find immediate cost savings. But first they should keep quiet, get on with the job and show they can sort out practical issues. It can be very difficult to hold your tongue when initiatives are so obviously wrong or contradict well known processes because some partners don't understand the first thing about marketing, but partnerships are built on informal respect and reputation. You can do nothing, nothing at all, until you win a voice.

No matter how old, out of date, and worn down they might look to you, partners are sophisticated people used to dealing with complex concepts. They easily get new ideas; in fact they have probably already heard any strategic argument you are about to make. What they value most though is time. The demands of their diary are horrendous and they can find it difficult to make space for their own family, let alone the marketing activities you have (no matter how innovative or profound they are). To be listened to at all you must first demonstrate empathy and prove your worth.

You will then be able to shape a coherent programme which has a cumulative impact, increasing leads and referrals. At the same time, you should be able to save costs and point to an impact on work flows. Through this, the best marketers win respect and become advisers on market-related issues. And there can be nothing more satisfying than to have a group of successful millionaires listening to you on how they can run their business more successfully. Both the work and the pay can then be really rewarding.

Use consensus gaining techniques

It is true that there are a wide range of marketing concepts which are taught to both masters and professional levels. It is also true that professional judgment can be every bit as profound in marketing as that demonstrated by accountants or lawyers. But partners are not interested. The plain fact is that marketing practice in the professions is nothing like as mature or developed as in other industries. A sophisticated technique might be appropriate but, in the normal run of things, don't blind your internal clients with science. If you have won your voice, they are too busy to do anything but rely on your judgement.

Having said that, a number of marketing techniques (like Ansof's matrix and scenario planning) work really well in environments where consensus is needed; for instance, when they are trying to chart a new direction. The “Directional policy matrix” for example can be used to make explicit partners' views of what makes practices strong. I have seen the leadership teams of several well known firms, move through the scoring system to a natural consensus and then allocate resources to grow the best practices. It's grown up market strategy and can have a profound effect. In one project with Russell Reynolds, it resulted in their whole firm changing its orientation from a geographic to a sector emphasis.

Understand and use politics, without being political

It is not possible to achieve anything significant in a professional practice without sponsorship. Every specialist that has thrived, or even survived, in a partnership for any reasonable time has had a personal sponsor. Marketing projects are likely to involve money, change and, most difficult of all, the time of others. Unlike plcs, partners have no real obligation to do anything, even if it is approved by the leadership. They can say no, dither, pay no attention

or, worse, say “yes” but mean “no”. A senior sponsor will be necessary to get them to open their diary, their resources or even their mind, particularly when you are new. Without it, they are unlikely to give your new venture any focus at all.

A sponsor might be the managing partner themselves or a powerful lead partner in a specialist area. (Not all partners are equal: some have visible external reputations, some are the natural leaders of an informal network of partners, some win outrageous amounts of business and others have formal leadership positions.) You should understand your sponsor's source of power and help to support them. But don't hang onto one sponsor for too long and, under no circumstances, be “political” yourself.

Take precautions

No matter how good you are; no matter what you know; no matter whom you know and no matter what your track record, it is likely that you will be out on your ear at least once in your career. This, again, seems to be the result of the unique nature of partnerships.

Large accountancy firms, for example, swing between employing specialists to run “support” functions and clearing them out to let a partner “streamline” them. Leading law firms will recruit marketing directors under one managing partner only to fire them again when the election produces a new leader. On the other hand, some idiotic leaders make snap judgements about people's capabilities and, at other times, pure organisational politics creates casualties. More than one marketer has been sacrificed to achieve other goals more important to the practice.

So it is sensible to always have a fallback strategy in mind. Start by keeping your CV up to date and get as qualified as you possibly can. Join professional bodies, network and get known externally. Develop the habit of staying in touch with both senior people and head-hunters, but be careful how you do it. Few mind someone getting in touch for advice from time-to-time but there is nothing more irritating than people who only call when they need help. Try to find an excuse to give to others, for instance, when they are looking to move. Although some will be blindly selfish and forget your help, others will gratefully return favours.

This is the stuff of real career success. No director, or even marketing partner (and there are one or two of those these days) succeeded without excelling in these soft skills. In my view, neither the CIM nor the PSMG does nearly enough on networking, political or communication skills. So you are probably on your own, but then survivors normally are, aren't they?

Laurie Young is a specialist in the marketing and selling of professional services. He can be reached via his website – www.lauriedyoung.com – or by email: lauriedyoung@aol.com

