

Take your partners...

It is the most important question for anyone who works in marketing or BD - in fact for anyone in a non-client facing 'support' role. It is the cause of stress, frustration and even tears. It can make the difference between success with high earnings and, particularly in these difficult times, redundancy. It is the number one, often unspoken, challenge of professional services marketing: how to relate to partners.

As I have said before in this column, the first step on this difficult journey is to win a voice and that is best done by getting things done. Partners can be extremely busy and stressed. Their mind can be full of the detailed content of several highly complex client projects and/or internal initiatives for which they have onerous professional responsibility. The sign-off on a set of public accounts or the assessment of a legal risk for a complex deal can be theirs alone. One recent research report showed that a large number lose sleep from stress and reach for alcohol or other stimulants. They can end up spending long hours at the office (more than one leading firm has pods where people can bed down during intense projects and many partners will keep a flat near the office) and suffer negative impact on their family.

So a practice marketer who can handle practical activities well is appreciated. They should keep quiet, get on with the job and show they can sort out the array of practical marketing issues which crop up. It can be very difficult to hold your tongue when initiatives are so obviously wrong or contradict well known techniques because some partner doesn'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. In any case, all marketing in any firm eventually comes down to someone somewhere doing the modern equivalent of stuffing envelopes or putting out the chairs.

There is a potential backwater here, though. It is possible for good 'support' people to become stuck as the personal aid to a partner; what one managing partner of a leading magic circle firm calls "the party planner". This type of BD or marketing person has hunkered down into the immediate safety of exclusive practical support to a strong individual. This can be because they cannot find a way of growing their role or it can be a reaction to the stress of responding to different partners' whims. In several circumstances like this, when I have talked privately to both the BD person and the partner, I have found both to be dissatisfied and slightly guilty. The marketer ends up doing things which are clearly beneath their professional capability and the partner feels that they are wasting a practice's resource.

As the partner finds it hard to find a way out of this position, it is down to the marketer to craft a more constructive use of their skills. The very best seem to learn highly advanced 'consultative skills'. They treat their partner group like internal clients, setting out to deploy their professional skills to best effect. This is the exact opposite of behaving like a subservient assistant. They seek to advise on the best course of action, influencing the outcome of both practical and strategic decisions.

This involves a number of highly sophisticated communication skills. A consultant needs, first, a perspective on the ambitions of their client, sometimes investing extra effort to analyse their client's client. They need 'insight' into their client's objectives and where their own professional skill can add value. This can be exceptionally hard inside a partnership because it is difficult for anyone other than a partner to really know what is happening inside the partnership's governance debate; but it is not impossible.

Above all, a good consultant chooses their interventions very carefully. One partner asked me recently if I felt uncomfortable advising successful multimillionaires on how they can run their lucrative businesses better. And that question gets to the hub of why marketing and BD in a practice is such a challenging role. Marketers have skills and training that, like a sports coach, can

improve the revenue generating capability of even the world's leading practices but, to succeed, they must negotiate the egos of outstandingly successful business people.

They must not be too strident. At dinner recently in East Asia, the head of one country's law society said that he had had to lay off his own BD/marketing leader after several years. This person had been extremely successful, crafting programmes that improved client relationships and reputation. The partnership was very pleased until they began to become too "strong". They started to forcefully push strategies and directions which, while technically correct, caused more and more partners to bristle.

The very best external consultants set out to become 'trusted advisors' to the world's business leaders. When I have run training sessions for people starting down this demanding course they are daunted by the communication challenges en route. Yet it can lead to outstanding rewards as clients give them work without putting it to tender.

The internal journey to become a trusted advisor to a partner group on marketing and BD issues can be just as challenging. It means taking training courses on communication or consultancy skills (sometimes in your own time and at your own cost). It means setting out to have the very best technical knowledge and honed management skills. It also means considering the impact of any and all interventions on the ego and political stance of partners.

In the past three years a number of the world's leading law and accountancy practices have, to my personal knowledge, sought and found marketing/BD people to take roles at partner (or partner equivalent) level in their practice. Several of these have been people from outside the existing professional services marketing community. So the opportunity is there and increasing, and there are marketers who are taking their partner groups into more sophisticated and effective worldwide marketing.

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