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Law Firms and Schools Might Try a Recruiting Redux

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In the midst of the annual spring and fall "recruiting seasons" at American law schools, I am always struck by how peculiar this practice remains. In no other industry -- for no other professional -- is the recruiting effort such a defined regimen. It takes place at a prescribed time every year, year after year with steadfast adherence. While most industries recruit young talent in an organized fashion, the legal profession takes it to a whole other level. This race for talent is akin to speed-dating forums where would-be soul mates have just a fleeting moment to size up someone they may very well spend the rest of their lives with.

Granted, it's not an entirely ineffective process. It certainly seems to work. Firms brag every year about the spoils from their efforts.

Despite being a time-honored tradition, however, should it be viewed as so sacrosanct? Winston Churchill once said: "Democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried." OK, but at least other forms were tried. The traditional law firm recruiting model has barely nudged in years. Creativity and innovation have been stifled. Law schools share the blame, but law firms have been slow to move beyond the traditional. Minimally, it is a system that begets lost opportunity for all.

Pragmatically speaking, the recruiting process, when examined in context of so many "best in class" business practices that have been adopted by law firms in recent years, seems antiquated and isolated. Enhancements can be made, starting with an injection of more marketing panache and creativity.

A MULTIFACETED APPROACH

As law firms continue to evolve into truly matrix-managed structures, it's time to embrace a more multifaceted approach to recruiting. Undoubtedly, the marketing department can have a huge impact on revamping the recruiting process to encompass a firmwide and yearlong effort. Recruiting is, after all, yet another form of marketing.

Marketing leaders can and should push for a more coordinated and sustained law school recruiting effort that usurps the traditional seasons. Similarly, why should lateral hiring be approached in an episodic manner? By insisting on a more omnipresent recruitment effort, hiring of experienced attorneys can be handled in a more consistent and effective manner. Marketing has liaised well with the practice support function. The same should be done with the recruiting function.

'THE CUSTOMER COMES SECOND'

Clients respond to how firms treat their people more than to slogans or advertisements.

Hal Rosenbluth, the founder of Rosenbluth Travel, wrote a book called "[The Customer Comes Second](#)," in which he pushed employers to focus first on their people.

Without employee buy-in and willingness to become ambassadors of the company, any external message to the market rings hollow. By directing attention to recruitment and its corollary functions such as professional development, performance



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management and alumni relations, firms create a legion of ambassadors who convey a message to students, clients and prospective clients that the firm has a culture they can identify with. That is what gets noticed on the outside.

GENERATION L: TODAY'S 2Ls AND 2Ls HAVE A NEW VOICE

It was a bit surprising to me how the grassroots organization [Building a Better Legal Profession, established by Stanford Law School students a couple of years ago](#), was summarily dismissed by most law firms. While many firms drafted a perfunctory response acknowledging their concerns and promising efforts to address them, no firms looked at this as something to capitalize on. They dismissed it as sophomoric naiveté. Again, opportunity lost. If marketing departments had dared to chime in on the situation, perhaps a competitive advantage could have been garnered. Placing associate testimonials on the firm's Web page, for example, could have spoken directly to issues raised by the group. Better yet, creating a firm Facebook site linked to the BBLP's Facebook site would have represented a major coup.

Facebook, you ask? Isn't that an online social network for teenagers? Go take a closer look. It's the new medium to best communicate with Generation L. It will be integral to recruiting efforts in the near future.

Good recruiting messaging brings good recruiting results. But it also makes an effective marketing tool. Clients want to know about a firm's people. Are they good attorneys? Are they happy? Will they stay with the firm? Does the firm coordinate its efforts to provide services across geographies, practices and accounts?

If it can be demonstrated that the firm recruits, retains and learns from its talent, the perception will be that it provides a better product to its clients. What employees feel about a firm stands out over four-color glossy brochures and slick advertisements. Allow me to illustrate. Look at these catchy slogans:

Worldwide. For Our Clients

One Firm Worldwide

A Global Law Firm Serving Business Clients

A World Within a Firm

Pretty clever, right? But whom do they belong to? What do they really say about the firm? More importantly, will these phrases make the difference for clients when selecting a firm? For that matter, will any of the text on a Web page, advertisement or brochure? The answer is, probably not.

SEIZE THE DAY

Effective recruiting is not only the lifeblood of any firm, it's the validation of all that a firm extols in its marketing material. A firm that conveys its recruiting philosophy and successes to the market through its people is sure to encounter many eager to receive it. The principles of stare decisis, so driven into the nucleus of legal minds, have continuously impeded innovative business practices -- and that goes for legal recruiting too. When any business function is kept separate from the normal organization chart or standard operating procedures, the group runs the risk of losing touch with the rest of the firm and vice-versa. This is not a Jerry McGuire-esque epiphany. This is a simple appeal to practicality. It's a chance for progressive firms to gain a competitive advantage. Carpe diem.

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