

The Biggest Crime In Law Firms

by Stephen Fairley

The biggest crime in law firms today goes unnoticed by most outsiders. It is not reported in the media. There are no police reports filed and firms don't even mention it on their websites. People don't talk about it on the street and partners often overlook it. Even though this crime is rampant, its presence is so subtle that many attorneys fail to recognize when it is happening. Unfortunately, this crime is the same one that is most likely to kill a small law firm. It is not stealing by employees, burglaries, or client complaints.

The biggest crime in law firms today is the crime of being forgotten. Think about it-you can recover from most other crimes by installing an alarm system, filing a lawsuit, or buying insurance, but if your firm falls victim to the crime of being forgotten, it is on the fast track to failure. There are opportunities every day for your firm to be forgotten by existing clients, potential clients, your best employees, referral partners, and the media.

SIGNS OF THE CRIME

Here are some **signs that your firm has fallen victim to the crime of being forgotten:**

- **Decrease in year over year revenues**
- **Less than 5,000 people a month visiting your website**
- **Less than a dozen inquiries every month from prospective new clients**
- **Losing large or long term client accounts**
- **High staff turnover**
- **Inability to attract and retain top people**
- **No mention of your firm in the media in the last 3 months**
- **Less repeat business from clients**
- **No word of mouth referrals** coming in the door

STEPS TO SOLVE THE CRIME

There are many things you can do as an attorney to help people remember you. I am not of the opinion that hiring a big PR company or spending enormous amounts of money are the only solutions. Here are some simple, low cost things you can implement today:

1. Focus on the question that every client wants to know: What's in it for me?

At the end of the day, every client is selfish (like you didn't already know that). With so many things out there vying for their time, attention and money, they

have become more and more cynical and self-centered. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but more a self-protective measure.

Your job as an attorney is to tell them what your service can do for them personally and remember- they do not want to spend time looking for the answer. The answer to this question must be one of the first things your clients see on your website and in your firm-wide communications. If your clients are going to remember you, you must first answer the question "What's in it for them?"

ACTION STEP: List every benefit, value, and result your client receives from your services. Closely examine all of your firm's communications with a critical eye. How accurately and consistent are you answering this question to all of your clients and prospects?

2. What differentiates your service from everyone else?

For every service you provide there are hundreds if not thousands of other attorneys who can provide the same services that you can. So why should someone hire you versus your competitor across the street or down the suite?

In other words, what is your UCA-your "Unique Competitive Advantage"? What can a client get from you that they cannot get from anyone else? Perhaps it is your credibility or the creative way you bring solutions to your clients. You must determine what differentiates your firm from anyone else and market that point.

When creating your UCA, one of the keys is to not use either quality or service. The reason is that every attorney says they provide quality and service (even though we know they don't). Therefore quality and service have become meaningless when it comes to differentiating your service because every client expects quality and service and will not do business with any attorney that doesn't have both already. Your UCA must be creative, yet accurately reflect who you are, what you offer that no one else does, and most importantly directly addresses the challenges of your target market.

ACTION STEP: Set aside a few hours this week to brainstorm with your partner and employees on what your firm offers that other competitors do not. Do some research to find out how other firms in your field are differentiating their firm.

3. All of your communication must be emotionally impactful.

Anyone can quote statistics or develop an advertisement on a cognitive level, but the most effective way to ensure a lasting impact on your clients is to communicate with them on an emotional level. You must find their "pain." What is it about their business, life, family, time, or environment that is causing pain? Are they not working or working too much? Is their business growing too fast or too slow? Is their family falling apart? Do they have a hard time tracking their

employees? Find their pain and communicate with them on an emotional level about how you can help heal their pain and make their business, life, family, time or environment pleasurable.

ACTION STEP: List all of the things you want your clients to feel when they think of your firm: excitement about the future, more secure, more time, better organized, safer, etc. Evaluate how well your current communication creates this feeling and specific areas where you want to improve.

4. Distinguish your benefits from your features and communicate them clearly.

Features are what your service does. Benefits are why your client needs your service. For example, one famous company advertises "our servers allow your website to be up and running 99.999% of the time." That is a feature, but you must also tell your client what the benefit of this is to them. Well, if their on-line business sells \$200,000 worth of product every day, then being on-line only 98% of the time will cost them serious money in lost sales. For every feature you have, you must tell your client what the benefit is. Is your firm better, faster, guaranteed or more personal? Will your service create more clients, decrease turnover, or increase profit margins? These are all great features, but you must tell your clients how this benefits them specifically.

Get in front of your potential market and detail your specific benefits. Build value into what you do and how you do it. If you fail to clearly communicate what your benefits are to your clients, rest assured- your competition will.

ACTION STEP: Take a piece of paper and draw two columns on it. Label on side "Features" and the other "Benefits." List all of the features of your firm and service and for every feature state what the benefit is to your target client. Integrate these statements into all of your communication efforts on a regular basis.

5. Reduce the risk of working with you.

Many of our clients work at small law firms that have services similar to those at larger, more established firms. Why should your potential client buy your service over the big firm's service? Are they taking a risk with a firm that may not be around 5 or 10 years from now? Is it just because you offer a lower price?

While no one can predict the future of your firm, the attorney recognizes the need to develop creative ways to reduce the risk of their clients in working with them. How could you lower the risk of your clients if they are concerned about working with a solo practitioner or a small law firm?

ACTION STEPS: List what you and your firm are doing to reduce the risk potential clients see in working with a small legal firm. How have you achieved success with other clients? Do you have a strong reference list?

6. How effective is your cheapest form of marketing- your business card?

Your business card is the cheapest form of marketing. I buy 5,000 new business cards every year and make it my goal to pass out all of them. Most attorneys make the mistake of only using the front side of their business card and leave the biggest part (the back) completely untouched. Examine your business card as if you were one of your target clients. Does it tell them succinctly who you are, what you do and how you can help them? If not, perhaps it is time to redesign it. Use the back of your card to focus on the benefits, results, and value you bring your target market.

ACTION STEP: Ask several of your existing clients what they think of your business card. What does it say to them? Is it memorable? How could you improve on it? Thank them for their suggestions and implement them in your redesign.

*Stephen Fairley is an international best-selling author of 10 books and 5 audio programs, including *Practice Made Perfect for Lawyers* (2005) and *Becoming a Rainmaker: Business Building Strategies for Lawyers*. Stephen has spoken to thousands of attorneys at state and local bar associations on topics related to marketing strategies for solo practitioners and small law firms. Sign up to receive Stephen's report "Top 10 Mistakes Attorneys Make and How to Avoid Them" at www.rainmakerretreat.com*