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**Balancing Traditional and
Non Traditional Thinking:
Evolving the role of law firm marketing**

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Coraggio Institute
coraggiogroup.com
Summer 2007

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A new era for law firm leadership is upon us. Those in leadership roles who ignore the new rules of law firm leadership do so at their own peril. The last gasp of the traditional “up or out” leadership approach can be heard loudly and clearly.

Today, the most responsive and successful firms value leadership at all levels and, as a result, are thriving with vibrant, diverse cultures filled with attorneys and staff who are aligned in their thinking, focused in their direction and willingly embrace the “soft stuff.”

We work with a broad range of clients and corporations inside a multitude of industries nationwide. Without fail our law firm clients present our greatest and most interesting set of challenges. Our work is often described by lawyers as “the soft stuff”, or “the touchy feely stuff” — a way of referring to anything that is perceived as getting in the way of achieving the minimum 1,850 or the super star 2,000 billable hours that represent the mechanics of the law firm hamster wheel.

For years, the marketing department inside a law firm was considered a necessary evil — a cost center staffed by people who spoke in tongues and drew pretty pictures. “What the heck do those people do down there anyway” was a common question posed by the most senior partners who longed for the way things used to get done (a business card and a handshake). Suffice to say, it hasn’t been easy being a marketing person inside a law firm. One had to be resilient and thick skinned in order to survive and make a meaningful difference.

Alas, things are changing.

Over the past five to seven years, the value and visibility of the marketing function within law firms has steadily increased and become more of an emphasis. Moving from somewhat of a fulfillment role to that of a strategic driver, the law firm marketing function is considered critically important. We see this in the various titles scattered about that are

sounding more and more like corporate monikers rather than traditional law firm marketing assignments: Chief Marketing Officer, Chief Strategist, Brand Manager are a few titles we’ve ran across.

So what’s going on?

While the law firm business model may never change, the thinking inside law firms is changing —especially within the ranks of senior partners, managing partners and those who comprise executive committees. Indeed it is an exciting time for marketing people.

The shift we are seeing among law firm leaders is the growing realization that in order to survive, it’s critically important that the firm understands what it means to be a formidable competitor in the marketplace. In fact law firms and their attorneys need to expert strategists as well as expert legal counsel. With well over 1 million practicing attorneys in the U.S., it’s clear that law firms have to be agile competitors in order to attract, secure and retain business (as well as talent).

This shift in mindset represents pure opportunity for the law firm marketing team to reposition itself inside the firm as a highly competent team of professionals who are capable of sharing the firm brand, identifying and mobilizing a competitive strategy while at the same time attracting qualified business to the firm.

A few considerations may be worthwhile for those marketing leaders looking to reposition their department within the firm from a fulfillment role to a strategic driver:

Pace Yourself

Our experience has been that law firm leadership recognizes the need for a top-flight marketing function. In order to achieve this, firms need to attract top-flight marketing talent yet they are still very much in a learning mode in terms of how to evolve from what some might call an old school marketing mentality to a 21st century point of view. Our advice: pace yourself.

It's important to recognize that law firms are in what we call a "tweeter" stage — that point where the firm is led by a blurred mix of traditional thinkers as well as non-traditional thinkers. Given this, as a marketing leader you must be skilled at managing both types — willing to help expand perceptions of the value of marketing in the minds of the traditional thinkers, while at the same time demonstrating agility and innovation for the non traditional thinkers.

Though your head and heart may map truer to the non-traditional mindset, don't give up! All progress is incremental and will bear out over time. Pace yourself — be strategic in your approach.

Be Realistic

Don't set yourself up for disappointment. Law firms are not the epicenter of creativity — in fact they may never be, especially when it comes to things like branding, taking creative risk and strategy. Be realistic with your expectations.

Marketing departments must be strategic in nature however; they must also provide a service to the firm. In this regard even the most strategically oriented law firm marketing functions must also provide excellent, often just-in-time fulfillment for partners who need something last minute. For example, updating bios for new attorneys, pulling information together for RFP responses or creating that last minute ad for the senior partner who just prevailed in a high profile litigation matter.

We have counseled many a CMO expressing frustration about the reality of their job in comparison to what they had imagined. Again, be realistic.

Don't Make it Difficult

We often receive calls from managing partners wanting advice on how to manage their Chief Marketing Officer or Brand Manager. "She always challenges my partners when they want something and now my partners are pressuring me to fix it" is a common frustration. Another: "He has created a process that is so cumbersome to access that we can't get any marketing done."

Be mindful of how you develop and expand the

perception of the marketing function. If you make marketing seem hard to access or if attorneys feel stupid for asking for something based on the 20 questions you toss at them, you're digging yourself a hole. Partner with the attorneys in your firm. Be helpful to them while at the same time working to expand the firm's collective perception of marketing as a strategic driver of the firm, while at the same time being a helpful participant in the process.

Engage Your Team and Create the Experience

Chances are you are either the leader of a law firm marketing team or you are a member of a marketing team.

As you organize yourself around how to evolve the perception and functionality of your marketing department, remember that your team's growth is part of the process. Similar to attorneys, many law firm marketing departments are comprised of a mix of traditional thinkers and non-traditional thinkers. As a result, your ability to strike a balance between the two while at the same time being effective at coalescing and aligning everyone on the kind of department "we" are creating is important.

Our advice: work on aligning the thinking inside your department before you gallop off and focus your energies entirely on evolving perceptions among the attorney ranks.

One of the ways to accelerate the process of being seen as a strategic driver as well as a service provider is to ensure that attorneys feel energized when they step into your department rather than frustrated and demoralized based on the "energy" of your team. When senior partners, in particular, feel energized and inspired by what's going on in the marketing department and when they feel like they are receiving value from you and the rest of your team the road becomes much easier to navigate.

Great law firm marketing happens as a result of confident and clear leadership — both on your part as well as among senior partners in the firm. Partner with them — they know they need you and most are working hard to expand their thinking about what marketing can do for the firm. Involve them in the process.

About Coraggio Institute

Trever Cartwright is a partner in the Coraggio Group and Coraggio Institute, a Portland-based consultancy that specializes in working with attorneys and law firms to achieve strategic clarity and improve leadership skills. Trever can be reached by calling 503-493-1452. www.coraggiogroup.com.