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Attorney Buy-In

Two law firm executives offer insight on how to sway the masses.

Stealth Strategies for Herding Cats

By Mark Whitley



You need to get lawyer buy-in.” An oxymoron? You bet. If you have any doubts read David Maister’s, “The Trouble with Lawyers” (*The American Lawyer*, April). Still, pretty much everyone on the firm’s marketing staff will hear this refrain frequently. It’s well meant, but it’s also code for “please don’t expect me to take full responsibility for your hair-brained marketing idea.” Of course, this never happens at Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice, the progressive firm where I toil (right!), but I’m told it’s fairly common at stodgy, traditional firms.

There are ways to tackle this challenge. Some are actually fun, if you allow yourself to plot imaginatively.

1. Pareto Lives

You don’t need to get every lawyer to buy in; in fact, that is never going to happen. You need to get the right lawyers to buy in. Probably only 20 percent of the partners influence 80 percent of the important decisions. The rest may not care or are too busy to notice. The influencers aren’t all in management jobs, either. You know who they are. Divide, focus, conquer.

2. Scarcity

Say this to any lawyer and see what happens: “I’m sorry, we’d love to help, but we just don’t have enough [money, people, time] to do that.” Before you can mutter “strategic priorities,” you’ll have partners demanding more resources for you so you can help them with their partner’s personal pet projects (pee-pees). Usually they’ll get what they want; after

all, it's their firm. Who can say no to a determined advocate? Win-win.

3. Swamp Fox

Francis Marion, the Revolutionary War general, used to "run away and live to fight another day." Getting buy-in requires winning many skirmishes and being wary of direct confrontation until you are certain of victory. It's guerrilla warfare. Persistence matters more than brilliance. Grind it out.

4. Hooray for Hollywood

Showcase your zealous advocates and early adopters. Get your champions on the hustings to tell their success stories firmwide, and they'll persuade their colleagues for you. Oh, they'll also sing your praises in the process and cover your back when needed. Win-win.

5. The Envelope, Please

There's nothing like competition to muster enthusiasm. Lawyers are driven to win. Ever notice those "ego walls" in lawyers' offices? All those wooden plaques contribute to depletion of the rain forests.

So give lots of awards. Who won't buy in to an idea that tangibly proclaims their own achievements?

6. The Ghost in the Machine

Ever notice what lawyers can do to a draft proposal? Don't blame them; they just can't help themselves. So ghost-write something that's merely the first draft; it ought not be perfect so long as it's not stupid. By the time the lawyers have finished "perfecting" your draft, it will be their idea. Now you've hooked them.

7. Break Eggs; Make Omelets

Sometimes you simply have to take a big risk. A good friend likes to "toss live grenades" (not my preferred sport) into a meeting just to get partners talking (debating? shouting?). Is he crazy? Like a fox: When the dust settles, he has a lot more buy-in than when he started. Remember, if your intentions are honorable, it's always easier to get forgiveness than permission.

8. Speak Through Your Clients.

This is marketing at its very best, and it's the most fun of all. All you want is for your lawyers to buy in to programs that please your clients and attract prospects. Lawyers will buy in to nearly anything if a client likes it (and it's ethical, etc.). When a client asks, that meandering cat herd will snap into formation faster than a gaggle of migrating geese.

So go ask your clients what they want. You've got all the tools. You are doing satisfaction surveys and client service interviews, aren't you? Every seminar or networking event is a market research opportunity in disguise. So just jump in there and ask the right questions. The findings are always the same. "Understand my business better, and tell me more about how you can help me." Find every way you can imagine to let the client speak out, and there will be no buy-in problem. Big, big win.

Will these strategies work every time? Of course not. Lawyers are bright folks, and they catch on quickly. So you have to keep devising new buy-in strategies. (Someday, ask me about "Columbo" or "Joe Friday"). Need help? Enlist a few clever lawyers to advise you. After all, it's for their benefit. **LFI**

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