

SIDEBAR

Making the most of your marketing during the holidays

MARKETING

By Mark Powers and Shawn McNalis



In balmy south Florida, a determined real estate attorney with a good sense of humor donned a Santa suit and drove from office to office on Christmas Eve to deliver baskets brimming with cookies. Greeted by those he visited with raised eyebrows and peals of laughter, he made quite an impression.

Three states away Louisiana, a team of paralegals stood at the entrance to their corporate law firm and accepted wrapped toys for charity as the admission pass to their holiday open house. Inside, a student chef from a local culinary school sautéed shrimp at one of the many food stations set up around the firm to encourage circulation. The firm's attorneys ushered their best referral sources and clients around the office while another student dressed as a waiter moved through the crowd with a tray of drinks held aloft.

Up in New England, a small, multi-partner law firm nestled at the edge of a park in the center of town invited a group of special clients to have

eggnog at their office, before walking over to attend a free holiday music concert in the park. Out west, a business lawyer and her architect husband hosted a series of intimate dinners in their recently restored historic home.

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By using students from the culinary institute to cook and serve, the Louisiana firm created an elegant event for only a few thousand dollars. It was a worthwhile investment, considering that the referral sources and clients who attended probably bought legal services worth more than a million dollars in the previous year.

The park-side firm put on a wonderful party for the cost of several gallons of eggnog and some snacks. The concert in the park is free and provides a wonderful low-cost marketing event every year.

The western attorney and her architect husband were able to entertain referral sources for both their businesses at the same dinner, and those in attendance appreciated meeting new and interesting people in their community.

After years of sending cards that were lost in the holiday crush, these firms wanted to do something more personal and a little different. They recognized that the holidays present a golden opportunity to express sincere appreciation to their referrers and, in doing so, strengthen their relationships for the future.

The upcoming holidays offer you a great opportunity to do the same thing – especially if you haven't sent thank you

notes or acknowledged your referrers throughout the year.

Why is this important? Keep in mind that a certain percentage of the referral sources that refer to you may be sending business to other attorneys as well. The explosive growth of practicing attorneys means competition in the future will be tougher than ever.

Gifts that keep on producing

Another way to acknowledge referral sources is through gifts, and on this front the possibilities are endless. Several of the attorneys we work with

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send Omaha steaks or large stuffed turkeys to their best referral sources, who eagerly await these treats every year.

Other attorneys prefer to give sports-oriented gifts – a few rounds on a favorite course, perhaps, or a series of sessions with golf pro. Another attorney we coach doesn't play golf, but loves football. He buys season tickets and generously shares them.

You can also send gifts that are related to your referrals sources' passions. A book on photography given to an amateur photographer speaks volumes; a hand-held GPS for a mountain climber ensures he or she will think of you when packing for a favorite vacation; a subscription to a top-notch wine-of-the-month club for a wine enthusiast will no doubt be well-received. Matching your gift to the referrer's preferences is a highly personalized way to thank someone for sending you business.

One South Florida attorney had his secretary discreetly inquire about where his colleagues liked to celebrate special occasions. He then directed his secretary to purchase gift certificates for the referrers and their

families to dine in their favorite spot. This highly personalized approach won our client a great deal of good will – and he didn't even have to show up. For him, a couple hundred dollars spent on gift certificates is a worthwhile investment when measured against the high value cases his referral sources send each year.

While giving gifts is a great form of acknowledgement, there is no substitute for meeting face-to-face with those you'd like to get to know. We encourage you to invite these referral sources out to lunch or dinner and express your appreciation for the business they send.

Our experience indicates that the best referral sources are usually those who become your friends or true believers in what you do. An expression of gratitude paired with good food in a nice atmosphere can go a long way toward turning a referrer into a friend.

By the time you read this, there will still be time for you to identify your best referral sources and plan gifts that reflect the appreciation you have for their continued business. To help motivate you, consider this: the lifetime value of a referral source who faithfully sends business can add up to thousands, possibly tens of thousands of dollars worth of business over time. In some practices where the average case is worth thirty or forty thousand dollars, a referral source may send hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of business over his or her lifetime.

We've said it before and we'll say it again: never underestimate the worth of your referral sources – they are literally putting money in your pocket and should be thought of as critical to the growth and survival of your practice.

So, whether you take the face-to-face approach or send a gift that reflects the recipient's interests, be sure you make the effort to do something. A little extra effort over the holidays can make up for any lack of gratitude you've shown in the past and set you up for a big win in the coming year.

Mark Powers is the president of Atticus, Inc., author of The Making of a Rainmaker: An Ethical Guide to Referral Marketing for Small and Solo Firms, and facilitates a marketing roundtable program for attorneys requiring a simple, focused approach to attract new clients. He can be reached at mark@atticusonline.com mailto:mark@atticusonline.com or by calling 352-383-0490.

Shawn McNalis is a former Imagineer with Walt Disney Co., Shawn credits her 15-year career with Disney for her creative, collaborative approach to advising attorneys. In partnership with Mark Powers for 12 years, Shawn is a senior practice advisor, curriculum developer, speaker and trainer for Atticus. Shawn co-authored "The Making of a Rainmaker" and numerous articles for a variety of legal publications.