

# MARKETING FOR SMALL FIRMS AND SOLO PRACTITIONERS IN NEW YORK STATE

by

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According to the New York State Bar Association, about 57% of its 74,000 members represent a solo practice or a small firm of nine or fewer attorneys. If you have a solo practice, or are a member of a small firm, how do you market yourself so that prospects will consider your legal services and clients will continue to hire you? Differentiate yourself from others and assess what is likely to work.

## **Focus.**

It can be effective for small firms and solo practitioners to concentrate on specific practice areas. By increasing your knowledge and experience in a particular arena, that focus makes it easier to market what you do.

For example, a three-attorney personal injury law firm in Buffalo clearly delineates its target market. Ziller, Marsh, & Lang, LLP ([www.zmlaw.com](http://www.zmlaw.com)), specifies: “The law firm of Ziller, Marsh & Lang, LLP, was formed in 1994 with the specific intent of helping Western New Yorkers who have been injured through the negligence of others.”

Albany-based Burke & Casserly, P.C.—with nine attorneys—primarily emphasizes elder law and the surrounding issues with a website ([www.burkecasserly.com](http://www.burkecasserly.com)) that mirrors the firm’s brochure, providing additional information about professional and community connections.

## **Build Your Reputation.**

Experienced attorneys who do an excellent job for their clients can accelerate their reputation with three business-building strategies: 1) Write articles; 2) Make presentations; and 3) Develop media. With all three, strive for accountability and consistency.

Depending on your time and interest, could you write an article a week, a month, a quarter? Write articles for trade journals that prospects and clients read; then order reprints and—where possible—link to the articles online. Put reprints in the firm’s lobby and, when appropriate, send copies to prospects and clients.

What presentations can you offer to your target market? An elder law or health care law attorney could create a seminar for prospects. An environmental attorney could present at an energy conference. After making presentations, stay in touch with interested persons.

Look for opportunities in the media. Write a Letter to the Editor or an opinion piece about an issue that is topical and relevant to your practice area. Get to know the reporters who are interested in your practice area so that you may initiate or respond to media inquiries. Develop a quarterly or annual survey that could interest the media.

Writing articles, making presentations, and developing media can lead to an impressive portfolio and a burgeoning reputation in your field.

### **Practice Area Marketing.**

Different practice areas call for singular marketing. It is common for personal injury attorneys to show up on television, elder law practitioners to advertise in the newspapers, and appellate attorneys to get referrals through other attorneys. It is less common but effective for Social Security or Workers’ Comp attorneys to advertise in

local *Pennysavers* and for family law attorneys to find clients through religious institution bulletins. Explore alternative marketing avenues, from creating a blog to leaving a business card when you pay the bill in a restaurant.

### **Develop Business.**

Develop a list of targeted prospects and methodically pursue those potential clients. Research the prospects to learn: 1) What legal issues are important to them; 2) What trade organizations or associations they favor; 3) What events attract their attendance. Understand, locate, and then go after your prospects. Be regimented with your follow-up as you maintain contact. Referrals may come from clients or colleagues so it is important to develop a referral system. Build relationships with attorneys who are in practice areas different from your own.

### **Pro Bono.**

Pro bono and community service are gratifying and part of your overall marketing. Compile a list of organizations or associations that are important to you. Choose several that interest you and support those organizations through serving on the board or helping in another capacity. Professional groups and non-profits typically benefit from volunteers and their respective contributions of time, talent, and/or financial resources. Through your involvement you can make connections that may lead to referrals, building a network throughout your chosen community.

Some firms choose organizations that are systemic to the practice area. An elder law firm may choose to support the Alzheimer's Association while a personal injury firm may be active in M.A.D.D. Consider participating on a bar committee that reflects your legal or community interests. Members of the New York State Bar Association have a

plethora of sections and committees from which to choose, from Criminal Justice to Media Law.

Whether you support the arts, coach a team, or walk for a cause, community involvement can translate into increased awareness for you and your law firm.

### **Marketing Opportunities.**

The Internet equalizes opportunities. While brochures still have value to send to prospects or as leave-behinds when you make presentations, websites are increasingly important to law firms. It is a way for prospects to find you and to learn about your law firm. For example, the website of Long Island matrimonial firm Fass & Greenberg LLP ([www.fglaw.net](http://www.fglaw.net)) features its four attorneys with a sophisticated theme that sets apart the firm.

Make it easy for clients: Have your own domain name. It is easier and more effective to market than going through a parent company.

With your firm's website development, there are a series of steps to take, from determining which search terms would drive prospects to your sites to choosing what content would be important to your prospects. Do you have a question about professional ethics surrounding marketing? Email the New York State Bar Association for the proper legal disclaimer for your website and other issues surrounding your marketing materials. And remember, New York attorneys are restricted from using the word "specialize."

### **Marketing Challenges.**

Typically, the challenges facing law firms include increased competition, prospecting, maintaining client contact, and letting clients know about other services the firm offers. Marketing touches all steps of the attorney-client relationship, from the time

you find a prospect (or the prospect finds you) to the moment when you deposit the client's check in the bank. Results-oriented action steps as simple as sending a handwritten note to thank a colleague for a referral can lead to marketing success for solo practitioners and small firms.

Solo and small firm practitioners carry a prodigious responsibility: marketing the firm, bringing in the business, performing the legal work, billing the clients, and collecting from them. Evaluate all marketing options and then determine which of those options would be viable.

Regardless of the size of the firm, take specific results-oriented marketing action steps for marketing that will work for you.

Merilee Marsh is a marketing consultant for law firms. See [www.merileemarsh.com](http://www.merileemarsh.com). If you have a specific marketing question, you may email her at [mm@merileemarsh.com](mailto:mm@merileemarsh.com).

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