What Do You Do?

Developing Your Client-Focused Marketing Messages

by Sara Holtz, ClientFocus

Imagine you are at a Chamber of Commerce networking event. A man whose name tag identifies him as the President of a technology company approaches you. He introduces himself and asks you what you do. If you are like most lawyers, your response will be something along the lines of "I'm a securities lawyer" or "I do complex commercial litigation." Or worse yet, "I'm an ERISA lawyer."

Think about that response from the potential client's perspective. Does he really understand what that means? Is it likely to lead to further conversation? Does she have any sense about how what you do might benefit her company? If you don't describe what you do in a clear, compelling way and explain why it might be of interest to the person you are talking to, you're missing out on an opportunity to begin to build a relationship that may lead to a new client.

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Before someone can hire you or refer someone else to you, the person needs to understand what you do. No matter where you are, whether on the sidelines of your child's soccer game or at a PLI conference, having a clearly thought-out, engaging response to the question "So what do you do?" can mean the difference between a superficial chat and an in-depth conversation that leads to "Wow! I know someone who needs your services."

Most listeners are tuned into radio station WII-FM (short for: What's in it for me?). They want to figure out quickly if what you do is of interest to them. Therefore, you want to respond to the "What do you do?" question in a way that speaks to their situation and needs. In other words, you want your response to be client-focused.

So what exactly is a client-focused marketing message? Quite simply, it looks at what you do through the eyes of a potential client.

Client-focused marketing messages

Client-focused marketing messages can take two forms:

A quick, 10-second "introduction":

> *I help construction companies in northern California resolve disputes over the work they've done.*
>
> *I help companies buy, sell, and lease real estate. For example, I did the legal work for the new Galleria. Are you familiar with that project?*
>
> *I represent life sciences companies when their licensing agreements go bad.*

Or a longer "marketing story," delivered in response to "So tell me more. ..."

> *I represented a company that was interested in selling a large piece of property. Unfortunately, the land was contaminated from chemicals that had been used when the property was a manufacturing plant. My clients were concerned that this would make the property virtually impossible to sell.*
>
> *I was able to negotiate an agreement with the buyers that made them comfortable about purchasing the property and didn't expose my clients to unlimited potential liability.*
>
> *As a result, my clients were able to sell the property and put the money into expanding their business. Last year, they were named one of the fastest-growing companies in our region.*

If your introduction was successful, people will want to know more about what you do.

Crafting your client-focused introduction

The goal of your client-focused introduction is two-fold:

- You want it to encourage further conversation (that's how you begin to develop a relationship).
- You want to state the benefit of what you do **from the client's perspective** (that's what's going to get their attention).

For example, let's recast the typical "I'm a commercial litigator" response into:

> *I help companies that are embroiled in disputes with their suppliers, customers, or competitors navigate their way through the legal minefields they face.*

With this brief but targeted reply, you are much more likely to tap into the listener's interest. This might lead to a discussion about how his wife's company is involved in a dispute with its software vendor or what a nightmare experience she had in litigation in which she was recently involved. The conversation is likely to continue from there.

To develop your own client-focused introduction, you need to answer two questions:

- Who are your clients?

    For example, are they large hospitals and medical groups in the Northeast, green energy startups, or companies that hire lots of employees from overseas?

- What problems do you help your clients solve?

    For example, do you help them pass their assets on to the next generation while reducing taxes, defend them when they are accused of fraud when their stock price drops, or protect their trade secrets from their competitors?

You'll note something about the answers to these questions. They are very specific (some might reasonably say limiting). These responses may not tell everything you do. You may do environmental litigation and insurance coverage work; you may handle consumer and securities class actions; you may represent media companies and large retailers. But if you tell people about everything you do, you run the risk of overwhelming them with information to the point that they will just stop listening. Better that your response is just a teaser that is designed to encourage them to ask more questions than to give them a comprehensive response that will prompt them to want to freshen their drink.

The client-focused marketing story is designed to respond to the invitation to "Tell me more."

If your practice has several different aspects (and those of most lawyers do), refrain from mentioning all of them. Instead, take your best guess about what the listener might be interested in. You won't get it right every time, but it's better than getting it wrong every time by boring people with a lengthier response. If you aren't sure what they might be interested in, focus on the part of your practice you most want to grow.

Developing your client-focused marketing story

The client-focused marketing message allows the listener to step into your client's shoes and imagine how you might help them as well.

It has four elements:

- What do you want the listener to take away from the story?

    Do you want people to view you as tenacious? To think of you as creative? Recognize that you are well-respected by the local judiciary? Understand the depth of your knowledge of their industry?

- What problem did one of your clients have that you helped solve?

  For example:

  I had a client who was the CEO of a bank. A disgruntled former employee sued him for sexual harassment.

  I had a client that made a product with very distinctive packaging. One of its competitors copied the design.

  I had a client that wanted to acquire a company that would allow it to expand its geographic reach.

- What did you do about it? What did you recommend, negotiate, or argue?

  For example:

  I recommended that we enter into mediation immediately after taking the plaintiff's deposition.

  I recommended that the client do research at the outset to determine whether consumers were confused about which company manufactured the product.

  I argued to the government that the deal was not anticompetitive and would create more jobs in an area of the country hit particularly hard by the recession.

- How did that help the client?

  For example:

  The client settled for less than 10 percent of what the plaintiff had demanded and the company avoided a lot of bad publicity.

  Once the competitor saw the research results, it promptly agreed to redesign its packaging to avoid confusion and the client avoided expensive and lengthy litigation.

  The client was able to complete the purchase of the company without the delay, diversion, and expense of a government antitrust investigation.

The more you tell the story, the more natural and streamlined it will become.

In crafting your introductions and stories, you may well discover that you need several different versions – depending on to whom you are speaking, their level of sophistication about what you do, and what their interests and needs may be. Your introduction may vary depending on whether the person is a business executive, an in-house counsel, or a partner in your firm (yes – you even need to educate your partners about what you do!).

If your practice has several aspects, you will need different stories to support those different practice areas. If you do employment counseling and litigation, you'll need stories to support how your advice kept a client out of trouble and how you were an effective advocate once the client got sued. If you represent financial institutions and commodity trading firms, you'll want stories focused on each industry.

Practice makes perfect

As in all things, practice makes perfect. The more you use the introduction, the more confident you will sound. You will eliminate phrases that aren't comfortable for you and edit out words that are jargon. The more you tell the story, the more natural and streamlined it will become. Nonessential details will be eliminated and the benefit to the prospective client will become more clearly articulated.

Tell the story or deliver the introduction to colleagues, clients, or friends and ask them for feedback. Did it hold their attention or did they lose interest? What did they take away from the story? Ask them to repeat what you have told them (the sure way to discover if you are getting your message across). Was there anything you said that they didn't understand or that they found "jargony"? Words like "transactions" and "equities" may be the stuff of your day, but "deals" and "stocks" may be more familiar terminology to them. And keep on the lookout for additional stories to add to your repertoire. Once you get into the habit of using client-focused marketing stories, you may begin to see them everywhere!

As a lawyer, you know the power of well-chosen words. You use them every day when negotiating or arguing your case on behalf of a client. By putting these same skills to use when meeting potential clients, you can tailor your message to get the business development results you want for yourself.

About Sara Holtz

ClientFocus founder and CEO Sara Holtz is the author of *Bringin' in the Rain: A Woman Lawyer's Guide to Business Development*. Sara helps successful lawyers become successful rainmakers. Since 1995, she has worked with hundreds of partners from the nation's leading law firms to help them grow their practices. She has created the Women Rainmakers Roundtable, which has helped over 400 women partners develop substantial books of business. Sara's work has been featured in *The American Lawyer, ABA Journal, Law Practice, USA Today, Litigation* magazine, and other publications.

Before founding ClientFocus, Sara graduated from Yale College and Harvard Law School, was General Counsel of Nestle Beverage Company, and was the first woman chairman of the Association of Corporate Counsel.

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