

LAW FIRM MARKETING AND COMMS SPEND GROWS BUT RETAINING STAFF IS DIFFICULT

Posted on 27/10/2015

57%

Proportion of marketing/communications/business development professionals at law firms in Spain and Portugal who think the lawyers at their firm do not fully understand the importance of their role

Category: [Archive](#)



A survey of law firm marketing, communications and business development professionals shows that while budgets have grown by up to 50%, high staff turnover is a problem

A total of 40 per cent of law firms in Spain and Portugal have increased their budgets for marketing, communications and business development in the last year, but all firms are suffering from a high turnover of staff in these areas, according to new research conducted by Iberian Lawyer.

A survey of marketing, communications and business development professionals at leading law firms in Spain and Portugal found that four out of 10 respondents said they had a bigger budget than 12 months ago, with nine per cent of survey participants saying their spend had increased by as much as 41 to 50 per cent.

However, it appears that law firms' efforts to improve their performance in these areas are being held back by an inability to retain staff. The majority of participants (53 per cent) said there was a "relatively high turnover" of marketing communications and business development staff at their firm. To illustrate the point, only one in four (28 per cent) of survey respondents had been in their current role for more than five years. A total of 14 per cent of respondents had been in their current role for between three and five years. However, 42 per cent of survey participants had spent less than two years in their current role.

That said, the perception of how long law firm marketing, communications and business

development staff normally remain in their roles is slightly different. Nearly half of all survey participants (44 per cent) said they thought such staff typically remained in their roles for between four and six years.

Pay packets

With staff retention an issue, should law firms pay marketing, communications and business development staff bigger salaries in order to attract and retain them? Possibly. Only 14 per cent of survey respondents said that, in general, the salaries paid to such staff were "above average" when compared to salaries for similar roles in other industries. The majority of those surveyed thought the salary was "average", while more than one in four (28 per cent) thought the salary was "below average".

More than two-thirds of survey respondents thought attracting the right people for law firm marketing, communications and business development roles was a problem. A total of 69 per cent of participants said it was "difficult to recruit good marketing/communications/business development staff".

So, what are the barriers to law firms recruiting staff with expertise in these areas? More than two-thirds of respondents (69 per cent) said that the relevant candidates are "not particularly attracted to the legal sector", while nearly half (44 per cent) said candidates believe there is "not sufficient opportunity for career progression at a law firm". It appears that another reason suitable candidates are reluctant to join law firms is that they believe law firms lack the requisite awareness of what marketing, communications and business development actually involves. More than a third (39 per cent) of survey participants said potential candidates believed that "law firms do not fully understand the function of marketing/communications/business development". Other reasons why respondents thought law firms struggled to attract potential candidates included: the salary on offer not being good enough (17 per cent); candidates belief that they will not be well supported by lawyers at the firm (14 per cent); and the belief that the role will not be sufficiently resourced by the firm (11 per cent).

Disrespectful lawyers

It appears that some potential candidates for marketing, communications and business development jobs at law firms are deterred by the feeling that they will be shown a lack of respect by lawyers. One participant in the study remarked: "I believe the main barrier is the way a law firm perceives the role of a so called 'back office' person – I think it comes down to respect, I think many business development and, marketing professionals are put off by the ego of lawyers." Another respondent indicated that some candidates believe, wrongly, that they need knowledge of the law to be successful in the role. "They think they haven't got the ability to work in the sector and that is too specialised," the respondent added. Perhaps a little less flatteringly, another survey participant commented: "Candidates think this [the law] is a boring sector."

On the point about some candidates believing that the sector is too specialised and therefore doubting they have the expertise to work in the sector, it is worth noting that only 19 per cent of respondents said they had a legal background. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (64 per cent) agreed that, in general, marketing, communications and business development staff at law firms do not feel "part of the team" and may feel like "outsiders".

Not taken seriously

In general, the majority of participants in the survey (56 per cent) felt that lawyers did not fully understand the importance of their role. Meanwhile, around four out of ten respondents (42 per cent) said that their law firm does not take marketing, communications or business development seriously enough.

Should such findings be of concern to lawyers and law firms? Yes. When given the opportunity to rate their law firms' marketing, communications and business development in comparison with other professional services firms, not one participant said it was excellent. Less than one in three (31 per

cent) said it was “above average”, with a total of 39 per cent describing it as merely “average”. More worryingly, 31 per cent of respondents described their firm’s marketing, communications and business development as “below average” or poor. Perhaps some food for thought given the recent advances made by the ‘Big Four’ auditing firms in Spain and the prospect of multidisciplinary practices being permitted in Portugal in the near future.

However, a number of positives emerged from the survey too. Two-thirds of respondents (67 per cent) said they were given the support they wanted from the lawyers at their firm, while a similar proportion (63 per cent) said their firm gave them “enough opportunities for learning and development”. Meanwhile, 58 per cent of survey participants said candidates were attracted to the sector because “working in marketing/communications/business development at a law firm represents a big challenge”. Furthermore, 31 per cent of respondents said their current role had turned out to be “better than expected”.

That said, the fact that two-thirds of respondents (67 per cent) said they did not think they would spend their entire career working in law firm marketing, communications or business development should be a concern. “I believe things will change in the future,” said one survey participant. “But for now, the main issue is the divide between a lawyer and a non-lawyer, or a fee-earner and a fee-burner – there needs to be a cultural shift in this regard, the best CEOs, managers, marketers and operational directors in the world are non-lawyers, but as soon as they step into a law firm that are immediately perceived as below the lawyers.”

In general, how would you rate law firms’ marketing/communications/business development in comparison to other professional services firms?	
Excellent	0%
Above average	31%
Average	39%
Below average	19%
Poor	11%

Methodology: A total of 37 marketing, communications and business development staff at leading firms in Spain and Portugal participated in the study, which involved an online survey taken in September 2015