

LEGAL BUSINESS

Marketing a niche practice: a promotional blueprint to build business

By Suzana Popovic-Montag

At some point or another, most lawyers will consider focusing their practices into areas of specialization. Rightly or wrongly, specialization brings with it the perception of “elitism”, with an attendant expertise and greater value being offered to the client. This, of course, leads to an expectation of higher hourly rates and better work product. Certainly the trend in the United States is to specialize a legal practice and most provinces in Canada have a much more specialized judiciary to address the unique issues arising out of a more complex practice.

Many areas of practice are conducive to the creation of a niche market. Although each will have its own particular nuances, there are many niche marketing tools that may apply “across the board”.

What worked for us

The following is a summary of the tangible steps that were taken by Hull & Hull LLP over the years to establish itself in an estates niche market. Hull & Hull operates substantially in the contentious litigation arena; however, out of necessity, there are many

non-contentious aspects to our practice as well. Most notably, it appears that many contentious estate matters settle or resolve themselves relatively quickly in the process. As a consequence, Hull & Hull has also developed a strong estates administration and non-contentious practice over the years:

- **Start with the founding partner** — Hull & Hull is fortunate enough to have begun its practice with the mentorship, leadership and guidance of Rodney Hull. Hull continues to be central to our marketing and niche position, and he is a great source of leadership and wisdom within the firm. Of course, not every firm can have this kind of “head start”, and many niche market firms have had to build their reputation using some of the other suggestions set out below.

- **Learn the product** — Perhaps the single most important aspect of creating a niche market is to indeed “learn the product” and to learn it better than anyone else. You really do need to start out as a technician before you can sell yourself as an expert. And one of

the best ways to develop that technical expertise is to write about your topic and get published in some of the journals and books that are most authoritative in your practice area.

- **Give in order to get** — One of the essential themes in developing any niche market position is that the more useful information you give away for free, the more you will get back. As you begin to establish yourself as an expert in the area, practitioners and others will call you with questions and want to “run” issues by you. Always embrace these calls and always be attentive to the fact that one of these calls may well end up being a file in the future. At Hull & Hull, we do not approach these calls on the basis that we expect a file from the actual call; rather, we consider the source and we hope to either receive work in the future or to at least build a positive “reputation” with that individual.

- **Build your database** — As you build relationships with practitioners, create a database and ensure that it is current. Every time you speak to someone or you have any contact with someone on



Suzana Popovic-Montag

a specific area, you have a name and a contact of someone who knows you, respects you and who would welcome receiving information from you from time to time.

- **Commence a newsletter** — In 1997, Hull & Hull published its first newsletter. *The Probater* is published four times per year and

see *MARKETING* p. 25

Communication with clients is key to marketing a niche practice

MARKETING

—continued from p. 23—

it is still sent out in hard copy to the firm’s ever-growing database. Once you start, though, it is very important to keep the newsletter going — you do not want to start a newsletter and then fade out. You will lose tremendous credibility from your readership. Furthermore, we find it helps to ensure that the topics that you are addressing in the newsletter are both timely and interesting to all your readers. We do not write newsletters about esoteric litigation points; rather, we focus on more general solicitor-bent topics that are of interest to a cross-section of our readers, who include solicitors, financial planners and accountants.

- **Know your audience** — In

June of 2000, Hull & Hull moved on from its newsletter and used its database to create a breakfast series. Our first breakfast series seminar was held for a group of approximately 20 attendees and, again, the topics were solicitor-based so as to interest a variety of individuals. The breakfast series is offered three times per year and has grown in numbers. Recently, we have had over 100 attendees plus almost 100 attendees by webcast and phone-in. Any kind of ongoing continuing legal education is of great service to your referral source and certainly welcome if it is priced properly and it is held on a time and date that makes sense to your attendees.

- **Keep your database current and accurate** — At Hull & Hull, we spend a great deal of time and

effort ensuring that our database is current and accurate, so that it is both useful to ourselves and that we are sending our materials to people who are actually receiving them. This is an ongoing project that needs to be monitored regularly and continuously in order to be effective.

- **E-mail** — The use of e-mail can be something that is both sophisticated and effective. Currently, we simply use the e-mail system as a “last minute” reminder — to alert those who may be interested in attending our breakfast series with one final notice to ensure that they do not miss the event. E-mail marketing is a whole separate topic in and of itself.

- **Podcasting and blogging** — In March of 2006, Hull & Hull

began a daily blog and two weekly podcasts. Currently, we take turns writing the blog daily, for one week at a time, so that the time commitment is not overly intense for each lawyer.

We also do two different podcasts. The first is called *Hull on Estates*, which is geared toward practitioners who may wish to hear about specific related developments in the area of estates; the second is called *Hull on Estate and Succession Planning*, which is a more general, topical estate podcast.

Both provide an excellent opportunity for the lawyers internally to “learn the product”, so to speak, and to also ensure that our audience understands that we know the product as well as anyone on the street.

- **Monetizing podcasting** — We have begun to monetize the podcasting, in a sense, by offering copies of our earlier podcasts on CD, and we have also added in the element of a comprehensive web page, which has an extensive media centre offering much of our written and video work free, online.

Conclusion

In the end, so much of what we do to market ourselves as lawyers will really depend on our ideal target audience, and how they can best be reached. With a little bit of trial and error, and a whole lot of perseverance, it can be done.

Suzana Popovic-Montag is a partner of Hull & Hull LLP, which specializes in estate, trust and capacity litigation.