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Business Development 101: Online Communication Strategies to Increase Your Billable Hours

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Lawyers are spread thin, and a lot of time is spent on laboring tasks and not on as many billable tasks. In fact, on average, lawyers only bill for 2.3 hours of their time. After factoring in realization and collection rates, the average lawyer only collects about 1.6 hours of billable time per day. And to go a step further, about 33% of an average lawyer's time is spent on business development.

If you recall, in Standing Out in Today's World: How Communication and Branding Can Make or Break Your Firm, we talked about the fact that 2 out of 3 potential clients say their decision to hire is most influenced by a lawyer's responsiveness to their first call or email.

The problem here is, these interruptions, emails, calls, not only take time away from you, but there is a recovery time that results in a 2 hours time loss per day. If you're getting these intake calls, they may not always result in good clients, so at that point, you would have just wasted your time. And without an effective process, you're losing money. It's as simple as that.

Before we jump in, it's important to be able to pinpoint some of the prominent dilemma's firms face when trying to correct the effects of productivity delays or an overall loss in billable hours.

The Dilemmas

Dilemma 1

Interruptions kill your productivity - You want to minimize interruptions.

But;

Potential clients demand quick response times - You want to maximize responsiveness.

Dilemma 2

Invoicing and chasing down late payments drain your time - You want to minimize time-consuming billing tasks.

But;

You need to get paid. And not after a collections agency takes a 30-50% cut - You want to maximize revenue.

Dilemma 3

Technology (software and services) makes you more efficient - You want to automate and sync tasks, processes, and data.

But;

If you’re with a smaller practice, you may not have or are limited with your IT/admin support. You can’t spend all day learning and configuring technology. You want simple, intelligent tools.

Solutions to the Dilemmas

They say there's a solution for everything. And we agree. They may take some time to implement, but if you can adopt cost-effective and efficient software for the following things, your firm will be solving a lot of the aforementioned dilemmas.

To improve efficiency, decrease interruptions, and increase the reliability of solid PNCs, your firm should have a system that includes:

- Routing and Tracking - This means you need to be recording and analyzing how every PNC reaches your website or voicemail. If you can pinpoint the inbound source for calls, emails, and web visitors, you will be able to drive more resources to those given channels and find PNCs who are actually looking for services your firm provides.
- Filtering - You need to be able to qualify potential clients and refer out those who are not a good fit to be represented by you/your firm. Don’t waste your time trying to make a square peg fit into a round hole.
- Intake System - Your software should be agile enough to conduct preliminary data capture as well as pull exhaustive records.
- Scheduling - Setting appointments and call-backs are essential and without the right tools, you will be left with no shows or PNCs who do not fit your firm's criteria.

And on a holistic level, your firm should be considering these factors when researching systems to implement:

- You will pay for what you get. Being cheap in the short term will not get you to where you want to be in the long term.
- It needs to be customizable for the needs of your firm.
- It should be easy to use and monitor.
- It should be comprehensive with multiple communication channels within one provider: fewer bills, less management time.
- It must integrate with your processes, systems, and other software.

Now you may be thinking, this is all great, but if I cannot get clients through the door, none of those efficiencies will matter. Well, the first step you should be taking is to understand your target audience and their entire journey leading up to signing on that dotted line. You cannot expect to prospect successfully if you don’t understand how people are trying to connect with you. So your next logical question should be...

How Do PNCs Reach You?

If you can understand how potential clients can reach you, you will not only be able to respond to them more often but maximize your time while doing so. The most common forms of communication between a PNC and a firm are typically through:

- Phone
- Email
- Text
- Website (Social media included)

With this information in mind, let's talk about how each of these communication platforms work in the context of a law practice.

Phone Systems: Landline, Cloud/VOIP, and SIP (softphone)

Landline

Pros - Landlines can be bundled with internet service, they're independent of power grids, and typically result in fewer dropped calls.

Cons - You really have minimal mobility, the carriers are limited, hardware is required for set-up, and you need contracts. The most detrimental factor of relying on a landline is simply the lack of availability outside of the office. And unless you know how to reroute your calls, they won't magically appear on your mobile device.

Cloud/VOIP (internet-based phone service)

Pros - You will have mobile and texting access and because there is more competition from a wide variety of providers, your costs will be reduced, you don't have to bundle, it is scalable, and you're not tied down to contracts.

Cons - Your calls will depend largely on the internet quality. If your wifi goes down, you could be in for some trouble.

SIP (softphone protocol that turns an internet-connected device like a computer into a phone)

Pros - Your computer and tablet can now function like a phone.

Cons - The cost associated is in addition to cloud phone service.

When you're thinking about phone service, there are different ways to route and track calls with priority so that you can be more efficient in handling them. And when you think about these services, you need to think about them from both the automation side and the outsourcing side. In other words, what services can be done through workflow triggers and minimal human intervention, versus paying outside vendors to handle the relationship.

Forms of Call Routing and Handling

Robots

Call routing/interactive voice response (IVR) allows you to set up certain prompts and greetings that are automated. This handsfree process is incredibly streamlined and you know exactly what you're going to get upfront because you are the one to program it.

This service can not only make your business sound more professional, but it can help save time by assisting with delegation and routing of calls to the appropriate staff or team member.

The obvious drawback is that these scripted services are only able to handle point-blank calls. They cannot handle discretionary conversations.

Humans

To start, are you using a service that is abroad or domestic? If you're using call centers that are not based in the US, be sure that their business norms and practices align exactly with that of your firms.

If you’re a smaller firm and someone from overseas answers a PNCs call, will they know right away that you do not have someone in-house doing client intake? Will there be a language or cultural barrier? These are all things to consider.

Is the staff working the phone lines dedicated or distributed?

With a dedicated team, you have a few staff members who are assigned to your matters and are trained on your accounts. So while they know how to specifically handle clients' needs, they become a bottleneck if they’re ever sick or out of the office.

Additionally, if you have a marketing campaign that’s ramping up, you will need to make sure you’re prepared for the influx in call volume. If your dedicated team doesn’t have the bandwidth to manage those inbound inquiries, don’t waste money on a large marketing campaign.

A distributed service is composed of the entire team where everyone is trained to answer calls. Because of this, the volume of calls per staff lessens because you have more people available to answer the phone.

Phone Systems: Potential Issues

Watch for these common complaints and problems that impact leads and clients:

Ring Delays (latency)

You may hear the phone ring once, but what the person is hearing on the other line is multiple rings before they hear you pick up. People are impatient, so this leaves the door open for these PNCs to hang up before you even hear your phone go off. With some systems, a client will experience up to 8 rings before it actually rings on your end. The best thing to do in this situation is audit your phone system. Have someone else from the firm call and check to make sure that one ring on your end is one ring on the caller’s end.

No Tracking or Analytics (how will you track marketing ROI).

If you run marketing campaigns, you have to be able to track who is calling and who is converting from those calls.

Did they convert? And if so, off which source? Were all your marketing channels working for you or did you have some that were underperforming? Were the leads high quality? Did they end up hiring you? You cannot sustain successful campaigns if you don't track this information from the beginning. You have to be able to pinpoint what works and what doesn't so you can make adjustments as you move forward.

Receptionists

Receptionist services can have a limited impact and a higher cost if you're only using them for answering, transferring, or taking messages.

Look at services that can do the lead qualification, that can do the basic intake automation, and lead capture so that you are more informed and not faced with a bunch of decisions at the end of the day as you face each recorded message. Set your criteria and know when to refer bad leads out, and when to begin setting appointments with clients you can and do want to represent.

Email Systems

We are all pretty familiar with email systems, however, the best piece of advice we can give you is to make sure your email is connected to and integrated with your practice management software so they are securely logged and easily pulled for reference.

The perk of this integration is that some practice management software has time tracking apps that allow you to directly bill for the time you spend emailing and corresponding with clients.

Additionally, you can build templates and workflows through third-party vendors that automatically trigger your emails to send out to whomever you want. With this type of automation, it is important that it is standardized and made uniform across the firm. You should not have one group of attorneys sending and tracking emails in one way and another group doing something completely different.

Someone going through a divorce is probably shopping for the right firm that fits their needs. In this case, when multiple firms are in the picture, you want to be able to build trust. To provide expertise without being overbearing and what you can do after a call or consultation is to follow up with them on an automated basis, without your individual input.

Text Messaging Systems

Being able to communicate with your clients whenever, and wherever you are is crucial. In fact, if you're not already texting your clients, you are falling behind the curve because that is where the rest of the industry is going. "Why you may ask?" Because that is what clients are growing to expect. Don't believe us, check out, Everything You Need to Know About Communicating With Your Clients Via Text: The Good and the Bad.

Your clients are texting other businesses. Whether they're messaging their accountant or plumber, it's becoming the norm, so don't resist this inevitable movement. Think of it this way… you work hard to meet your client's needs financially and even emotionally. Why not do the same when it comes to communication?

The largest push back we hear regarding text messages is the lack of privacy. How do you communicate with clients the way they expect without sacrificing your personal number? Well, let us tell you…

There are some practice management solutions that will provide you with your own designated cell phone number. This number not only masks your personal line but works via phone, computer or tablet. And the best part? There are timekeeping features within this solution that will track the length of your conversation and automatically create a billable event for you. So, not only are you speeding up communication, you are increasing your earnings too. If that isn't a win-win, then I don't know what is.

Web Chat Systems

Put simply, a webchat is an internet online chat system that allows people to communicate in real-time using easily accessible web interfaces. Web chats are commonly used because of their simplicity and accessibility to users who do not wish to take the time to install and learn to use specialized chat software.

These web chat systems can come in many forms. Whether this communication option is on your firm's website, or your Facebook page, anywhere you have an opportunity to connect with a PNC should be capitalized on. Here are three potential options for you to consider.

Robots

AI-powered robots are low-cost alternatives with lightning-fast responses. You can program frequently asked questions with defined answers and you can stem some of those recurring, inbound phone calls and emails (the ones that seem to suck the most time out of your day) with pre-programmed responses. By doing this, you can hopefully reduce the number of interruptions you experience from having to answer them.

Additionally, you can allow PNCs to schedule appointments, interact with links to more information, and form fills, and you can forward direct messages or inquiries to specific members of the team. The goal is to eliminate the extra step it would take for someone to manually sift and sort through messages.

You can also route escalated issues to the appropriate party or offer extensions for the PNC to leave a message.

With chat robots, you're paying for the access and ability to program the chat. You can have the chatbox appear on specific pages to reduce the cost associated with having one on every page or you can have a box populate on any page a user visits. Chatbots can be very valuable if used correctly and offer a great, friction-free point of connection between your target audience and your firm.

Humans

Costs associated with human labor varies depending on whether your internal team monitors the chat or if you outsource the labor. When you add in the element of human interaction, you can capture much more data, and more directly determine if the PNC is worth your time or not. You have much more control over the conversation and can offer more descriptive responses.

However, watch out for the “self-staffed but unattended” trap. This is a very common problem and what happens is a PNC will message what they think is a monitored channel and they will be left unanswered and unhappy. Your chat box should not become just another “contact” form.

Website Chat Tips

Disclaimer

Add a disclaimer before the chat starts stating that the communication held via the web chat does not constitute a client-attorney relationship, legal advice, and is simply there to help direct a PNC to where they need to be.

Be Proactive

Staff with live agents, and choose “patient” active engagement.

Gatekeeping

Serve as a “gatekeeper” to an online calendar for consultations to reduce no-shows and cancellations.

Lead Qualification & Referrals

Identify leads with your custom criteria and schedule callbacks and appointments with new qualified leads. Also, refer out bad leads as quickly as you can to save time and improve efficiencies.

The Takeaway

Attorneys spend a lot of time managing the communication and business development efforts of PNCs. There are so many communication tools out there to improve this process, but if you do not know how to use them you will not only be creating inefficiencies for yourself, but you will be losing billable hours too.

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