

Does Your Marketing Content Contribute to Information Overload?

By John F. Reed

It's a noisy world out there. Online, offline, in our inboxes and mailboxes, on our phones and televisions, and elsewhere we are inundated with information from marketers vying for our attention.

Although attorneys encounter the same flood, they ignore the Golden Rule when it comes to marketing, doing unto their audiences as they would *not* have others do unto them, creating content that often contributes to—rather than alleviates—information overload.

Much of the problem is due to “me-too marketing”; that is, lawyers replicating other lawyers' ideas and methods. By taking a strategic approach to creating and distributing your content, however, you can distinguish yourself and your firm from the crowd.

Content sources and platforms

Marketing content is the information intended to differentiate you and your firm and to generate top-of-mind awareness among your target audience of clients, prospects, referral sources, and others. Content includes:

- Practice information and attorney bios
- Newsletters

- Articles and white papers
- Firm announcements and news
- Attorney honors and awards
- Case and matter studies
- Verdicts, settlements, and outcomes
- Presentations and PowerPoint slides
- Photos, pictures, charts, and infographics

The platforms used to distribute content vary:

- Websites and blogs
- Social media (LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, etc.)
- E-mail marketing (Constant Contact, MailChimp, etc.)
- Print mailings
- YouTube and video sites
- Podcasts
- Press releases and wire services

Given all the alternatives, it's no wonder we're plagued by information overload. So, what type of content should a lawyer generate and which platforms work best?

The answer is...it depends. The information a personal-injury lawyer communicates differs dramatically from an immigration practice; even among similar practices,

audiences look to diverse channels for the content they digest.

How well-intended content leads to unintended discontent

One would think law firms would align the content their audiences want with the best ways to reach them. That's not necessarily the case, as the *2017 State of Digital & Content Marketing Survey* by Greentarget and Zeughhauser Group illustrates.

Researchers asked in-house counsel (clients) their opinions about law firm content marketing while posing similar questions to law firm marketers (firms) about how they prioritize their marketing tactics. The results were enlightening:

- Twenty-six percent of clients indicated that information overload is a “big problem” and 50 percent indicated it was “somewhat of a problem.”
- Forty-seven percent of firms believed information overload was a “big problem” for their clients and another 47 percent said it was “somewhat of a problem” for their clients.

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Therefore, we can conclude that law firms are keenly aware of the noise their clients regularly experience. But when asked how their marketing efforts would change in 2017:

- Eighty-one percent of law firms indicated they will produce more content than in 2016; and
- Forty-nine percent of law firms stated they have increased their content marketing budgets over the last year, while another 49 percent said they will maintain the same expenditures as 2016.

Despite being sensitive to their clients' struggles, law firms are contributing to information overload by spending more money to produce more content.

But wait—there's more. When asked to rank content generated by law firms, clients indicated what they value most:

- Client alerts—87 percent
- Practice group newsletters—67 percent
- Blogs—35 percent
- Social media posts—4 percent

Clients then ranked the content sources they use to select law firms:

- Articles and speeches—91 percent
- Website bios—90 percent
- Blogs—77 percent
- LinkedIn profiles—71 percent
- Content shared on social media—53 percent

Meanwhile, law firms prioritized their content marketing investment for 2017 as follows:

- Social media—91 percent
- Blogs—83 percent
- Client alerts—76 percent
- Practice group newsletters—50 percent

These disparities show that law firms are delivering content clients don't value using platforms clients don't prefer. Considering that 76 percent of firms said they have no documented content marketing plan in place, should we be surprised?

The four pillars of your content marketing plan

A content marketing plan should be a thoughtful, outwardly focused system consisting of:

- Goals—the intended primary outcome
- Strategy—the approach one takes to achieve the goals
- Tactics—the tools one implements to pursue the strategy
- Measurement—a set of metrics to determine if the strategy and tactics are working

This is the same framework attorneys use in the matters they handle. For example, a litigator and her client may determine that the goal of bringing or defending a lawsuit is a quick resolution using a strategy of intense discovery to pressure the other side into a settlement or laying the groundwork for summary disposition. Tactics could include carefully crafted pleadings, requests to produce, and interrogatories, along with intense depositions. The lawyer might measure success by the ultimate outcome, as well as expediency, expense, and the absence of media coverage.

A transactional lawyer handling the purchase of a business applies the framework the same way. The goal may be an acquisition to increase market share with a strategy

of ensuring that all of the target company's assets, liabilities, and risks are properly assessed. Tactics may include exhaustive due diligence; consultation with creditors, auditors, and accountants; and regulatory compliance checks. The results are measured by legal fees and other costs, timing, and the final sale price.

Now let's apply the framework to your practice. Your goal might be to expand name recognition and brand awareness, thought leadership, or new client origination, but we'll assume your goal is to grow revenue from existing clients. There are really only two ways to do this—getting more of the same work or taking on matters in associated areas—so your strategy is to penetrate and cross-sell. Tactically, you need to educate clients about changes in the law, the consequences of not taking action to address them, and the effect that other laws might have on their lives and livelihoods. You could do this through client alerts and practice group newsletters. You might measure the effectiveness by revenue, e-mail open rates, newsletter click-through rates, and inbound client calls.

Make your marketing content hit the mark

The key to your content marketing plan is shedding the notion that you instinctively know what works best. Marketing is about your audience members and how they see you. Here are some tips to keep in mind.

Effectiveness over efficiency

Online tools offer one-size-fits-all solutions, but sometimes streamlining does more harm than good. For example, never allow LinkedIn to access your address book to invite everyone you know to connect, and don't e-mail all your contacts a legal update that applies only to a portion of your audience.

Segment and customize

Remember, your audience comprises different people with different pain points and interests. E-mail marketing allows you to

segment contact lists by categories (industry, location, job level, life stage, client, prospect, referral source, etc.). Developing tailored content for each group demonstrates your care and concern, which breeds trust and recognition.

Reuse, recycle, and repurpose

Leverage content across marketing channels to ensure broad coverage. While the Greentarget/Zeughauser Group survey shows that clients value alerts over newsletters, blog posts, and social media updates, those channels aren't mutually exclusive. A blog can also be an alert that can be shared on social media. A collection of blog posts can become a newsletter. Maintaining an editorial calendar to map out your content and publication schedule avoids bottlenecks and ensures consistency.

Engage

Marketing sets the table for business development, so use marketing content to initiate and continue business development conversations. Reach out to audience members for their opinions about your communications, ask which industry magazines they read to identify writing opportunities, learn which professional organizations they participate in to uncover speaking opportunities, and get ideas for future topics. Within those dialogues, you may identify pressing legal issues, which can generate new work.

Get help

Creating a content marketing plan can be a challenge. Assemble people in your office to share ideas and devise your plan. Visit legal marketing websites and read business

development books. If you're better at writing briefs than blogs, talk to a legal marketing consultant about ongoing support.

A quick story to wrap up

A solo practitioner recently asked me about launching a newsletter in addition to his blogging and social media activities. He created a template in MailChimp, filled it with blog content, and was ready to hit the send button. His question was how many of his address book contacts, LinkedIn connections, and Facebook friends he should include on the mailing list.

Instead of spamming all his prized contacts, I told him to call or e-mail people individually to ask if they would like to receive the newsletter. A month later, he reported that after heeding my advice, the results exceeded his expectations.

Many people said they would be happy to receive the newsletter. Others politely opted out, but many who declined thanked him for asking, telling him that no one had ever asked for permission before. Some of the people gave him new work—before the first newsletter went out.

By acknowledging the threat of information overload and seeking consent, the lawyer avoided the me-too marketing trap, enhanced his reputation, and brought in new business. The newsletter statistics he measures are impressive, and though a few recipients occasionally unsubscribe, he uses that as a reason to call, listen to their rationale and suggestions, discuss possible legal needs, and maintain valuable relationships. ■



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John F. Reed, Esq., is the founder of Rain BDM, a business development and marketing consultancy that helps law firms of all sizes build outstanding client relationships. Working with clients in Michigan and across the country, he trains attorneys in client development and social media.

The Rain BDM team provides firms with strategic planning, tactical support, content and comprehensive blog management, and outsourced marketing department services.