

SMALL FIRM MARKETING STRATEGIES TARGETING EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
STUDENTS

by

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ABSTRACT

The traditional view of marketing in the legal sector has historically been described as an inappropriate, unprofessional, and overall disliked practice (Hodges, 2013.) Law firms initially used Yellow Pages as an advertising avenue, but the legal sector has undergone a transformation over the past three decades, which has caused such traditional techniques to no longer be sufficient in ensuring a firm's success (Hodges, 2013).

There is more marketing than ever in the legal sector, but some firms are not using the most effective strategies or are resisting marketing as an essential business function (Taylor, 2014). Unfortunately, marketing is an underdeveloped and under researched practice within the legal sector (Ellis & Watterson, 2001).

The purpose of this study is to determine the effectiveness of marketing strategies targeting college students implemented by small law firms in Greenville, North Carolina, based on survey responses of East Carolina University undergraduate students. This research should allow attorneys to successfully target students and achieve name awareness, generating new clients through the demonstration of attorneys' qualifications via digital methods.

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INTRODUCTION

The legal sector has undergone a transformation in the past three decades. Today lawyers are experiencing higher client expectations, modern information technology, and generational differences (Hodges, 2013). The legal profession has experienced considerable growth and as a result, traditional techniques are no longer sufficient enough to ensure a firm's success, a strong client base, firm recognition or even survival among these changes (Hodges, 2013). By utilizing key marketing practices, lawyers are able to evaluate competing firms, identify their market place, identify their target market and ultimately create relationships with clients (Hodges, 2013). Unfortunately, marketing is an underdeveloped and under researched practice in the legal sector and is often the management function that is most difficult to master (Ellis & Watterson, 2001). A particular issue for small law firms is they may not have a large amount of funds to allocate to marketing development, so it is critical that marketing dollars are being spent on the most effective methods. Therefore, more research regarding the marketing of law firms is needed to better understand what methods are most effective.

Pitt County, North Carolina is the home to over 21,000 East Carolina University students, which comprises approximately 12% of Pitt County's population and 23% of Greenville, North Carolina's population ("Measures," 2015). As campus populations across the country increase it will become more critical for local lawyers to focus on this segment of consumers (Beard, 2003).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The traditional view of marketing in the legal sector has been described as inappropriate, unprofessional, and an overall disliked practice (Hodges, 2013). Lawyers were not able to advertise until 1977 because service advertising was considered an unethical practice (Callahan, 2014). Upon the ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court, *Bates v. State Bar of Arizona*, lawyers were

permitted to advertise their services (Callahan, 2014). Marketing is too often associated with misleading advertisements, but today it is no longer classified as an unethical or manipulative practice (Hodges, 2013). The first law firms to adapt to the Supreme Court ruling were primarily small firms with a specialization in personal injury and bankruptcy (Callahan, 2014). These firms began advertising with the Yellow Pages and via cable TV (Callahan, 2014). This had an effect on the legal sector, creating a new emphasis on branding law firms; personal relationships were no longer enough to attract new business (Callahan, 2014).

Word-of-mouth had been considered to be the most reliable tool for lawyers to attract new clients (Ellis & Watterson, 2001). The evolving legal sector proves that word of mouth is no longer sufficient in creating new business for firms (Taylor, 2014). Many potential clients will find word-of-mouth to be unhelpful, due to a unique set of legal problems that may differ from the lawyer's recommender (Amyx, et. al., 2009). A survey conducted on client perceptions produced results ranking reputation as an important factor when choosing an attorney (Ellis & Watterson, 2001). This survey also showed that 80% of respondents could only name one firm, but 90% were not able to define specializations of these firms (Ellis & Watterson, 2001). This indicates very little client awareness of the legal sector. Effective marketing strategies and branding can bridge this information gap, form better client perceptions, and create firm awareness (Leelapanyalert & Woo, 2014).

While some firms are continuing to resist marketing in their business practices and remain reliant on word-of-mouth, many firms are adopting marketing as a business function (Taylor, 2014). Although advertising has been looked down upon in the legal sector, it has been proven to be an effective tool to increase firm recognition and awareness (Ellis & Watterson, 2001). Some firms are using social media channels to reach existing clients and provide

information for potential clients (Taylor, 2014). In spite of today's digital age, there has also been an increased amount of ads in magazines and legal journals (Callahan, 2014).

Today, there is more marketing than ever in the legal sector, but some firms are not using effective strategies or are still resisting marketing as an essential business function (Taylor, 2014). In order to be successful in today's competitive market, lawyers must expand beyond their law degrees. Lawyers are no longer just considered professionals in their field, but business people as well, and it has become more important to allocate more effort to marketing strategies (Hodges, 2013). Larger firms have been outsourcing their marketing or developing their own internal marketing department, but this may not be attainable for small firms (Callahan, 2014). There are various marketing methods currently used by firms, but the most effective methods have not yet been determined.

Unfortunately, targeting college students as potential clients can be difficult due to the stigma college students associate with advertisements and the information gap between students and those in the legal profession (Beard, 2003). College students have an unrealistic view of legal services that has been filtered by courtroom scenarios seen in movies or on television (Levin, 2004). College students have a wide variety of legal troubles that are not typically similar to the courtroom scenarios depicted by the entertainment industry (Levin, 2004). This informational gap gives college students an unrealistic expectation of attorney performance and pricing (Levin, 2004). College students have the tendency to be more cynical towards advertising (Beard, 2003). A study shows that 67% of college students believe that the content of advertisements should be more truthful (Beard, 2003). With highly populated college campuses, reaching college students is more important than ever.

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of marketing strategies targeting undergraduate students implemented by small law firms in Greenville, North Carolina, based on the perceptions of college students at East Carolina University. This will determine what marketing strategies are effective in generating new business for firms.

METHODOLOGY

A survey has been created to quantify the effectiveness of various marketing channels utilized by lawyers to target East Carolina University undergraduate students as clients. This survey was distributed and data collected via the online survey platform, *Qualtrics*. The survey utilized skip logic to ask differing questions to students who have previously hired an attorney in Greenville, North Carolina, and those who had not. Questions were designed to determine student awareness of practicing attorneys in Greenville, factors that are considered important by students when hiring an attorney, and the effectiveness of various advertising channels. These questions are critical in the determination of the most effective marketing efforts made by Greenville attorneys that target East Carolina University students. The survey was taken by 262 East Carolina University students, but only 221 surveys have been fully completed and analyzed for this study.

RESULTS

This survey was completed by a sample size of 221 East Carolina University undergraduate students. The results of this survey revealed that there is little name recognition among the undergraduate student body of practicing attorneys in Greenville; 48% of respondents did not have any awareness of attorneys in Greenville offering services to college students. While 24% of respondents could name one attorney and 23% of respondents could name 2 to 3

attorneys, only 4% of respondents could name more than 4 practicing attorneys offering services to college students. Awareness of attorneys was primarily generated by word of mouth, 80% of respondents had learned about attorneys this way. Approximately 50% of awareness was generated via the Internet through websites and search engines.

The results of this survey can be separated into two subcategories, students who have hired an attorney previously in Greenville, North Carolina, and students who have not previously hired an attorney.

Of the students surveyed, 68% of the sample had never thought about hiring an attorney in Greenville. If this subset would need to hire an attorney, 90% reported that the qualifications of an attorney would be important to them. Other notable factors include the following:

- Word of Mouth – 57%
- Name Recognition – 44%
- Location of Office – 34%
- Website – 27%

If these students needed to seek legal advice 78% of surveyed students reported they would seek the guidance of their parents. Other methods students would use to seek legal advice are the following:

- Word of Mouth – 58%
- Search Engine – 42%
- Website – 39%

The other 32% of respondents had considered hiring an attorney in Greenville and 66% of those who had considered hiring an attorney actually hired an attorney in Greenville on at least one occasion. Attorney's qualifications and word of mouth were each reported by 67% of

respondents as factors that were important in their process of hiring an attorney. The following were also notable factors when selecting an attorney:

- Name Recognition – 55%
- Location of Office – 22%
- Other- 22%

Within the “Other” option, fifty percent of respondents said price or affordability was a critical factor when selecting their attorney.

When evaluating advertising mediums to determine the most efficient marketing efforts search engine utilization, social media platforms, and traditional advertising methods were analyzed. For the purpose of this study search engines will be considered web platforms, such as Google, Yahoo, etc. Social Media platforms will be considered Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, or other media in which users exchange interface. Traditional advertising is inclusive of TV advertising, radio broadcast, and print media. When using a search engine, the majority of respondents, 56%, only read through the first page of results, while 30% will read through 2 pages, and only 14% will read 3 or more pages of search engine results. The most frequently used social media platforms for the sample were Facebook and Instagram comprising 87% of respondents.

The traditional methods of advertising explored in this study are print advertising, cable TV with local commercials and local radio broadcasts. Cable TV broadcasts are watched on a more frequent and sporadic basis, but there are less loyal users. Of the students that reported watching cable TV with local commercials, 71% watch at least once a month. Local radio broadcasts are less frequently used, but obtains more daily listeners. While 37% of respondents

reported to listening to local radio broadcasts almost never, 27% reported to listening almost daily.

#	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total Responses	Mean
1	I am more likely to hire an attorney I recognize from advertisements.	24	85	82	27	3	221	2.55

Table 1

Table 1, shown above, shows the results of students’ perceptions of the likelihood they hire an attorney that they are able to recognize from advertisements. This question is in the form of a Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree” to the statement, “I am more likely to hire an attorney I recognize from advertisements.” With a mean at 2.55, the average response is “Agree” or “Neither Agree or Disagree.” Considering the average response along with 24 respondents who “Strongly Agree,” students believe they are more likely to hire an attorney recognized from an advertisement.

DISCUSSION

Upon the analysis of the survey results it is more evident in what marketing and advertising strategies are most efficient for Greenville attorneys when targeting East Carolina University students.

Name Recognition

While there is a lack of attorney recognition among East Carolina University undergraduate students, name recognition has been ranked as an important factor in the process of hiring an attorney. The lack of attorney recognition from survey respondents indicates that the current marketing efforts targeting students are not sufficient enough to create top-of-mind

recognition or even name recall. Name recognition may become increasingly important to law firms surrounding the university with a growing undergraduate student body, due to location ranking as the 5th most important factor when undergraduate students selected an attorney. To generate name recognition within this target market an effective marketing and advertising plan would include search engine optimization, website enhancement and social media utilization.

Search Engine Optimization

Search Engine Optimization will be more critical to attract students that have not previously needed legal services or who have never sought legal services in Greenville. A search engine was reported as a preferred method to seek legal advice by 42% of respondents. The survey results indicate very few college students are reading search engine results past the first page of listed results. Search engine optimization could increase potential client interaction and firm awareness amongst this target market. Methods to appear on the first page of search engine results should be utilized.

Website Enhancement

When seeking legal advice 39% of students would look at an attorney's website. Websites are another method that could attract students that have not previously needed legal services or who have never sought legal services in Greenville. Students ranked guidance from parents important most frequently if they would need to seek legal advice. A website can be an ideal platform to target the parents of college students in a professional and credible way. The qualifications of an attorney was most frequently considered important to potential students when choosing an attorney. To fully enhance a website, qualifications that demonstrate a successful career would be important to make available to potential clients, students and parents' of students. Office location was also considered important by the sample. Including a Google

maps link or clear directions on a website to demonstrate close proximity to the university could attract potential clients.

Social Media

While social media was not considered a significant platform in which a student would search for an attorney, attorneys can take advantage of this cost efficient advertising channel. For students actively searching for legal services, LinkedIn and Facebook would be the most effective social media platforms to utilize. While neither avenue prove efficient in increasing clientele, both avenues could complete the first step of generating firm recognition. Once recognition is achieved, the results indicate that it is more likely for a student to pursue legal services from the recognized attorney. Social media may also act as a cost efficient method to replace traditional advertising efforts such as yellow pages, direct mailings, television and radio broadcasts.

Word of Mouth and Traditional Advertising

Even during the Digital Age, the survey results indicated that word of mouth is a preferred method to students who have sought legal services in the past. Word of mouth was not an option as frequently reported by students who have never sought legal services, which could be due to the lack of attorney recognition. A benefit of the utilization of social media platforms is the ability for consumers to generate word of mouth with comments, reviews, and endorsements outside of their direct network of peers. The consequence some attorneys may face is the loss of control of what potential clients are saying about their practice.

TV and local radio broadcasts have large reach, but the survey shows lack of viewership amongst this target market. The sporadic nature of this target market's viewership or listening to these advertising avenues show that, while it may create attorney awareness, it may not be worth

the absolute cost, particularly for TV advertisements. The absolute cost of TV advertising may be the worst of all traditional media (O'Guinn, 2015). A thirty second spot of airtime can cost approximately \$100,000 (O'Guinn, 2015). While radio broadcast may not be as expensive as TV advertisements, a minute of radio airtime can cost over \$10,000 (O'Guinn, 2015). The absolute cost for smaller firms may prohibit firms from utilizing these traditional advertising efforts and they may never see their return on investment.

The survey results showed print advertising, such as yellow pages, direct mailings, the local newspapers and magazines, generated a small amount of attorney awareness amongst students who have previously hired an attorney, but was not listed as the reason for selecting an attorney. These traditional marketing methods and advertising avenues will not likely increase the amount of college students as clients without the collaboration of other marketing methods, but 15% of students reported this method generated name recognition. Only 4% of respondents who have previously hired an attorney considered print advertising in their selection of an attorney.

CONCLUSION

There is an evident lack of awareness among East Carolina University undergraduates of the attorneys in Greenville, North Carolina, that offer legal services to students. To target East Carolina University students as an essential target market, attorneys will need to generate awareness in order to create name recall or more ideally, top-of- mind recognition. Along with name recognition, attorney qualifications should be demonstrated to students and the parents of students. There is potentially still a place for word of mouth to market attorneys to this target market, but it is likely to be generated most efficiently and effectively via social media platforms to generate word of mouth among clients. Survey results conclude that search engine

optimization, enhancing websites, and social media platforms are most likely to increase student clientele for small firms in Greenville, North Carolina. In order to optimize an attorney's chances of being selected by a student, targeting their parents through marketing and advertising efforts will be critical.

LIMITATIONS

This study is specific to marketing efforts in Greenville, North Carolina and to the students of East Carolina University and their opinions and perceptions. This study may not be an accurate indication for lawyers aiming to market to college students in different geographic regions.

The results of this survey may be limited and indicative of the demographic statistics of the survey respondents. The majority of respondents, 74%, are 21 years of age or older. The majority of respondents, 65%, are female students.

This survey was distributed through the social media platform, Facebook. Students responding through this survey distribution channel may be more inclined to respond to Facebook advertising opposed to students who received this survey via another distribution channel.

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