

# Trust, Client Access and 'a Voice' All Keys to Success With Law Firm Marketers

"If you want people to excel, they have to have a voice," Terry Brantley of Swift Currie said. "They have to be involved in the plan."

By David Gialanella | April 11, 2019



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*\*Editor's Note: This is the second part in a two-part series examining the issue of hiring and retention of chief marketing and business development professionals at law firms. Read part one [here](#).*

Leaders at [Swift Currie](#) learned more than they wanted to know about recruiting for the business development position when the firm's longtime chief left several years ago.

Michele Golivesky, business development director, departed the Atlanta-based midsize firm after 12 years in 2011 before returning in 2016. Managing partner Terry Brantley said the firm learned during that time that such professionals are "highly sought after if they're good at what they do."

"We ran through a couple" people in that position during Govilesky's absence from Swift Currie, Brantley said.

"It was very difficult to find business development directors, and it was very difficult to keep them," he said. "That's such a challenge for a law firm."

The interim business development chiefs integrated into the firm well, but one was heavily recruited and took another position, while another left because of a family relocation. Because it takes six months to a year for such a professional to truly become familiar with a law firm and its practitioners, the experience was all the more difficult, Brantley said.

"Every time you feel like you got some momentum, they move on," he said.

New Orleans-based midsize firm [Galloway, Johnson, Tompkins, Burr & Smith](#) is currently recruiting, and, according to managing partner Jason Waguespack, "it's very competitive" in the hiring market. Former business development and client relations manager Jordana Richmond, after spending five years with the firm, left to go to another industry.

There are many considerations. In terms of retention, a study of Am Law 200 firms conducted by [Calibrate Legal](#) set the average tenure at less than six years for “first chair” marketing professionals. On compensation, [a recent report](#) from ALM Legal Intelligence found a wide range in pay for first-chair marketing roles based on firm size. For firms of 100 to 249 attorneys, average salary is about \$205,000, and average bonus about \$22,000, according to the report.

Calibrate Legal’s CEO, Jennifer Johnson Scalzi, said in an interview that law firms’ approach to hiring has evolved over the years.

“The reason there was such a churn in the early 2000s: law firms realized all of a sudden, ‘we’ve got to do this,’” Scalzi said—“this” being a serious approach to the in-house marketing function. Firms began hiring “big ticket people,” bringing aboard “this idea of what they wanted,” she said. Over the years, emphasis shifted to more of a pure marketing function, to business development, to a more “evened out” approach since 2013 or so, she said.

The approach continues to evolve on a firm-by-firm basis, it seems. And those that allow professionals a significant stake in firm business strategy, as well as client-facing roles, claim success on several fronts. Including retention.

Galloway finds itself in hiring mode, but the firm already has transformed its approach to marketing and business development. Richmond became the first person in her role about three years ago.

Around that time, Waguespack said, he attended a managing partner conference at which the topic of nonlawyer sales was discussed—an idea that some found “very controversial.”

“Traditionally, firms have not marketed that way,” he added. “Nothing touches a lawyer’s heart more than his client list.”

According to Waguespack, Richmond had a sales background, but at the time was in a pure marketing role and not using that background. The firm promoted her and had a group of staff report to her, including someone in a marketing role.

Lawyers were not forced to use Richmond’s services, but “the lawyers who embraced the idea found that clients ... liked talking to nonlawyers first,” Waguespack said. “We got a lot of positive feedback from it. ... It worked out really well.”

Waguespack said he believes a business development element to the role helps with retention: Richmond was included in business strategy meetings, given a significant degree of autonomy, had a travel budget, and ran monthly business development meetings. “I really let her take the lead.”

“Having that kind of authority and autonomy in your firm gives them buy-in,” he said.

Swift Currie’s Brantley agreed.

“If you want people to excel, they have to have a voice,” Brantley said. “They have to be involved in the plan.”

Golivesky returned to Swift Currie after her five-year absence in 2016. She and director of marketing Ashely Mucha—another long-tenured professional with the firm, having been there since 2007—each report to the managing partner. The two, along with an assistant whom they share, make up a three-person department.

Golivesky and Mucha are involved in the firm's strategy and planning, Brantley said, noting, "They are chairing committees where equity partners are merely members of the committee." They both attend management retreats, are encouraged to generate ideas, and help "push the boundaries," according to Brantley.

"We've tried very hard to be progressive in this way," Brantley said. "You've got to trust them and allow them to move you out of your comfort zone," and any sort of stifling is "a good recipe for having them leave."

"I've talked to folks in the marketing area, and that's why folks move on," Brantley said of the latter type of environment.

He added that expectations must be realistic, reiterating that it takes up to a full year for a professional to really learn his or her firm. "You have to invest heavily in educating those folks well on the front end," because they "have to know each individual [lawyer] and what their strengths and weaknesses are," Brantley said.

Because that familiarity is key, integration at a midsize firm can be smoother for a professional, according to Cynthia Voth, director of client engagement and innovation at [Miller Nash Graham & Dunn](#), a midsize firm with offices in the Pacific Northwest.

"When you're at a midsize firm, it's a lot easier to get to know all your attorneys," said Voth, who also is current president of the Legal Marketing Association. "You can definitely have a more personal approach."

She added, "if you have 1,000 attorneys, no one person can know them all. ... You're not going to memorize all the strengths." At 155-lawyer Miller Nash, she said, "I know the majority of them and where their opportunities are."

Voth provides another example of longevity and advancement in the position. She started Graham & Dunn of Seattle in 2011 and stayed on through a 2015 merger with Portland's Miller Nash. In the early years, Voth was a "one-person show" at Graham & Dunn, and then had an employee reporting to her. Now, after the merger, there's a team of professionals, she said.

The team's duties include handling client feedback interviews, which gives the clients more of a neutral party to take feedback. Marketers and business developers are frequently linked with efforts to win new business, but such measures as client feedback interviews can help keep existing work, Voth said.

Such services "don't show up on a bill" but do benefit the firm's bottom line, and marketing and business development professionals are committed to "bringing dollars in the door versus being a cost center," she said, noting that clients often want to hear from professionals at the firm other than the lawyers they deal with regularly.

"In the end, we're all trying to drive revenue," she said.

Voth said there's been "progress made" since the Great Recession, as law firms have come to appreciate the importance of business functions in staying competitive. As a result, some firms have adopted a collaborative environment.

"Those of us at firms like that—we stay," Voth said.