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How to Lengthen the Life Cycle of Law Firm Marketing Leadership

The past year has provided some extreme examples of just how short-term one these positions can be. But there are ways for law firms and their chief marketers to make their relationships last.

By **David Gialanella** | April 19, 2019



Photo: Bigstock.

Editor's Note: This story is adapted from ALM's Mid-Market Report. For more business of law coverage exclusively geared toward midsize firms, [sign up for a free trial subscription](#)

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When Jennifer Johnson Scalzi made the change from law firm marketer to recruiter in 2004, there was a buzz about the so-called life cycle for law firm marketing professionals, she said.

“There was a rumor that it was 18 months’ turnover,” Scalzi, CEO of Calibrate Legal, told the Mid-Market Report in a recent interview.

The average is longer than that, at least more recently: A study of Am Law 200 firms conducted by [Calibrate Legal \(https://calibrate-legal.com/\)](https://calibrate-legal.com/), using data as of January 2017 from LinkedIn, set the average tenure at five years and eight months for “first chair” marketing professionals—those in “chief” or “director” roles.

Excluding professionals who had been hired the previous year, of whom there were 25, the average increased to six years and five months, according to the report.

Still, with a handful of very long-tenured people at some Am Law 200 firms potentially skewing the data to some extent, the true average might be closer to three years, Scalzi estimated.

All of those averages are longer than the once-rumored 18 months, but perhaps they are still more frequent than law firms would like for them to be.

The past year has provided some extreme examples of just how short-term one these positions can be.

Last month, [Hill Wallack \(http://www.hillwallack.com/\)](http://www.hillwallack.com/), a midsize law firm based in Princeton, New Jersey, [parted ways with its chief marketer \(https://www.law.com/njlawjournal/2019/03/18/new-vacancy-for-hill-wallacks-chief-marketer-highlights-job-plagued-by-high-turnover/\)](https://www.law.com/njlawjournal/2019/03/18/new-vacancy-for-hill-wallacks-chief-marketer-highlights-job-plagued-by-high-turnover/), Joshua Peck, just three months after taking him on, affiliate the New Jersey Law Journal reported. Neither Peck nor the firm explained the circumstances of the departure, though Peck, who previously had been director of media relations at Philadelphia-based Am Law 100 firm [Duane Morris \(https://www.duanemorris.com/\)](https://www.duanemorris.com/), said it was “not a good fit.”

In February, Am Law 100 firm Fox Rothschild (<https://www.foxrothschild.com/>) hired a marketer who departed after only a few days, though the change of direction apparently stemmed from a job relocation issue, and the firm has since hired someone else for the position, The Legal Intelligencer, another affiliate, reported (<https://www.law.com/thelegalintelligencer/2019/03/06/fox-rothschild-hires-new-cmo-from-midsize-phila-firm/>).

And a heightened level of mobility was on display in mid-2018, when affiliate the New York Law Journal reported (<https://www.law.com/newyorklawjournal/2018/07/02/flurry-of-cmo-moves-shakes-up-law-firm-marketing-departments/>) that at least eight large firms had either hired or lost a chief marketing officer over a two-month period.

Cynthia Voth, current president of the Legal Marketing Association (<https://www.legalmarketing.org/>) and director of client engagement and innovation at 155-lawyer Pacific Northwest firm Miller Nash Graham & Dunn (<http://www.millernash.com/>), said “you hear stories” about law firms where leadership isn’t on board with a robust marketing program. And some marketers, she said, once they reach the two- or three-year mark at a law firm, will be asked by others in their field, “are you going to start looking?”

“That’s a different employment mindset,” said Voth, who started with predecessor firm Graham & Dunn of Seattle in 2011 and stayed on through a 2015 merger with Portland’s Miller Nash. “The market is changing so much, there are always projects” at a firm, she added. “It’s never one and done at any business.”

“If you’re setting a strategic objective, you want to execute it fully ... or keep building on it,” Voth added.

Part of the issue, it seems, is a lack of understanding or clear vision of what the law firm marketer’s responsibilities are. In some cases, it’s a question of how many tasks, particularly client-facing tasks, partners and firm managers are comfortable with a staff marketer doing.

Scalzi noted, especially at smaller firms, “the number of times I have to tell the lawyers the difference between marketing and business development.”

Also, “law firms are so siloed,” and often “a wall goes up” between the lawyers and the marketer once a client or matter is booked, said Scalzi, who is an LMA board of directors member along with Voth.

Voth pointed to “the attorney-nonattorney hierarchy.”

“The industry in general has that hierarchy,” though “each firm has their own culture,” she said.

Meshing with Leadership

The most common reason for turnover is a change in leadership at the managing partner or chief operating officer level, according to Scalzi, who said new leaders might have a different philosophical approach to marketing, or simply not mesh well with the incumbent marketing chief. Lack of resources for the marketer also can lead to failure, she said—an email marketing system and database access, for example, are crucial to effectiveness but can be costly.

The onus is as much on the marketers to do the job right and set expectations.

“I’m a big fan of great communication,” Voth said, adding that it’s “incumbent on us” to communicate with the firm lawyers about what a project requires. “It’s the same thing that an attorney might do with a client.”

Harmony between the marketer and firm leadership is a two-way street, and in some situations the person in the marketing job might not be right. According to Scalzi, “marketing people are really good at marketing themselves, but a lot of them are missing a change-management chip.”

“They walk in and say, ‘this is what you’ve got to do,’” Scalzi said. “Lawyers don’t like to be told what to do.”

Sometimes firms recruit for the position themselves. In many cases, Scalzi said, her team handles assignments for firms that recruited on their own and the last two marketers didn't work out.

Jason Waguespack, managing partner at New Orleans-based midsize firm Galloway, Johnson, Tompkins, Burr & Smith (<https://www.gallowaylawfirm.com/>), is seeking a new chief marketing officer, after the firm's previous marketing leader left for an organization in another industry. That opportunity offered an equity stake in the hiring organization, Waguespack noted—something that a law firm ethically cannot do.

"She was very, very good," Waguespack said of Jordana Richmond, who spent two years in a pure marketing role before being promoted to a business development manager position, with marketing staff reporting to her, three years ago.

In the later role, Richmond interacted with clients. That approach was a shift for the firm.

"There was some trepidation among the attorney ranks," Waguespack said. "There were some partners who embraced it, and some who didn't."

But Waguespack, it seems, learned what Scalzi described as an important distinction that some lawyers don't know.

"There's a difference between marketing and business development," Waguespack said.

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