

How to keep a captive audience

In the first of a two-part article on how small law firms can survive in a post-Clementi world, Nick Jervis says the professional-looking offices of banks offer an object lesson in how to project the right image

It is clear following the Clementi review that at some stage in the future other businesses will be able to offer legal services. While many believe that it is the supermarkets that will pose the biggest threat to high street solicitors, I believe a much larger threat will come from banks that already have their high street presence and are much better placed to market professional services.

With this in mind, it is worth considering how smaller law firms can learn from the way banks already market their businesses to ensure that, once deregulation takes place, you are well prepared to stand your ground and keep your clients.

Your premises

This is one area that always causes me grave concern when I visit a new firm of solicitors. If you walk past a bank, you will expect to see bright signage, clear window displays that advertise the latest products and everything looking clean and fresh.

Unfortunately, if you walk past a firm of high street solicitors, aside from the fact that you are likely to do just that, if you do notice it you will more often than not see aged signage, brass plaques that have not been polished for some years, Venetian blinds closed all day and a sign saying 'Closed 1-2pm'.

What message does this send to prospective and existing clients? Does this send a message that you are always keen to welcome people into your building? Do the banks close at lunchtime, when most people are walking past your free advertising space? Do the banks miss the fantastic opportunity of free promotion that your building offers you?

The public's perception is often still that solicitors are not approachable and this is one of the reasons why, if you are denying that this is the case, why do conveyancing referral Web sites and claims companies exist?

Stand outside your offices today at lunchtime and see how many people walk past your premises

without realising they are there. Could you do better? If you have window advertising, do you change it regularly? If you have blinds in the windows, remove them. If you need some sort of sun screen opt for a frosted lining in the top third of the window, leaving the rest available for free advertising space.

Your reception

When you walk into a bank you are normally greeted by a smartly decorated, clean area with a colour scheme that matches the bank's branding. The cashiers and receptionists are always smartly dressed, normally in a uniform, and I have never walked in and seen one with their head down reading the latest copy of *Goodbye Then Weekly*. I wish I could say the same about all of the solicitors' receptionists I have entered.

Can your reception area be improved? If you are going to persuade a client to part with £150 per hour, should your reception area not be the first place where they are convinced you are worth it?

You should therefore remove the clutter, paint the reception in your corporate colours and spend some money training the receptionist how important new business is to your firm. If necessary, offer a performance bonus if he/she converts incoming enquiries into new business for your fee-earners – and supply a uniform.

Cross-selling

While standing in a line at the bank, have you noticed the plethora of marketing materials that are placed all around you? Large brochures, small brochures, mini guides and promotional postcards are all within arm's reach.

The banks realise that at this point you are a captive audience. They want to ensure that you cannot walk out of their premises without knowing that they can meet all of your financial needs, from mortgages to savings and current accounts to loans.

If a client spends ten minutes in your reception area, will they walk out knowing that you can cover



Walk down to reception and remove every single piece of printed material that does not have your practice name on it

most of their requirements for legal services, or will they simply have a quick read of *The Times* and think nothing of your services?

Without looking, do you know how many different types of promotional materials you have in your reception? Or perhaps of more concern, how many different charity leaflets are on display (I have often counted a ratio of one firm's material to five charity ones).

Just like the banks, your best opportunity of ensuring your clients know how you can help them is to tell them while they are a captive audience in your reception area.

Solicitors are generally not comfortable hard-selling the firm's range of services to their clients, so it is even more important that you make the most of the opportunity to let your literature do this task for you. After all, it is widely accepted that it is ten times easier (and cheaper) to sell more services to existing clients than it is to recruit new ones. So you absolutely must make the most of your reception area for this purpose.

If I could make you act on just one piece of advice in this article, it would be this: leave your desk immediately and walk down to reception and remove absolutely every single piece of printed material that does not have your practice name on it, including *The Times*.

If you were sitting or standing in a bank and were offered a newspaper or a brochure, which would you choose? If the newspaper is removed and you are left with no choice, are you now more likely to pick up a bank brochure, or at least look at the cover? Take away the choice so that the only choice is you.

If you find this leaves you with only one or two printed materials of your own, order some more and ensure they are in different sizes and with different messages.

In part two, I will explain how, for a relatively small investment, significant improvements can be made in your marketing communications.

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