

ZEN AND THE ART OF LEGAL NETWORKING

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INSIGHTS & COMMENTARY ON
*Relationship Building
within the International
Lawyers Network*

POSTED IN LEGAL MARKETING, TWO FOR TUESDAYS

Law Firm of the Future: Move it or Lose It

BY LINDSAY GRIFFITHS ON SEPTEMBER 13, 2016



“What they really need is leadership willing to make decisions.”

That’s what one reader feels is going to be required of the law firm of the future. And that’s true, isn’t it? Although it’s inherent in some of the responses we’ve seen from the authors included in [HighQ’s book on Smart Law](#) – in order to make changes and be ready for the future, you have to have curiosity and open-mindedness, a level of comfort with innovation. But really, you have to have guts.

It reminded me of the phrase clients have been using for years – “Change or die.” I’ve blogged about it before, so I searched Zen to see where it came up – and you might be surprised to see that we’ve been talking about this for six years already:

- [Law Firms: Change or Die?](#) from Georgetown’s Law Firm Evolution Symposium of March 2010
- [Change or Die? A General Counsel Panel – Part I](#) from the General Counsel Panel at the Legal Marketing Association’s Conference in March 2012
- [Change or Die? A General Counsel Panel – Part II](#)

We keep talking about changing or dying, and sometimes, changing an industry like the legal industry is like turning an ocean liner – it takes time. Will we see the monolithic shifts in the industry that we hope to in the next five years? The next ten? That remains to be seen. But we do need bold, strategic thinkers with varied characteristics and guts to be leading the charge. As Will Rogers said “Even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there.”

Today, let’s look at what two more authors in HighQ’s ebook see as necessary characteristics for the law firm of the future.

Ron Friedmann: Better Service Delivery

[Ron Friedmann](#) is a consultant with [Fireman & Company](#) and President of [Prism Legal Consulting](#). I love what he has to say about the law firm of the future, and not just because he emphasizes getting rid of the caste system within law firms. His focus for the law firm of the future is two-fold, and it all focuses on the client.

First, lawyers must learn to work better with other professionals (my recommendation – let’s stop using the term “non-lawyer”). How does this benefit the client?

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Doing so will deliver better quality output by tapping marketing professionals, IT professionals, accountants, consultants, and other domain experts.”

The truth is lawyers are smart people. But so are marketing professionals, IT professionals, accountants, consultants and other domain experts. We are uniquely qualified in our areas of expertise by our training and experience, just as lawyers are uniquely qualified in their areas of expertise by theirs. We can all work together to effectively and efficiently serve clients in a way that builds relationships and brings business into a law firm, and ultimately strengthens the bottom line.

Secondly, clients have different expectations these days about what it means to deliver effective service.

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For decades, lawyers have believed and acted on the basis that ‘I deliver the right answer to my clients and that’s all I need to do’. Today, we’re in a dramatically different and more competitive market. Clients have new expectations.”

We’ve talked about this idea before on Zen a lot – it’s the belief that smart is what differentiates you. But that’s no longer the case – smart is what gets you to the table. Friedmann agrees.

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The new mindset must recognize that, in most cases, 90% of matters, clients will assume that most any lawyer they pick will come up with the right answer. Clients want empathy and better service delivery. Empathy means a true understanding of pressures on the client.

And better service delivery means, for example, lawyers who return phone calls and emails, who deliver to expected turnaround time, who understand the client’s risk tolerance, and who budget accurately and deliver to budget. It’s simply no longer enough to just have the right answer.”

These are tough expectations. But I know some truly excellent lawyers who can, and DO, deliver on these expectations on a regular basis. At the end of the day, we’re in a service business. And while the results absolutely matter, the process is often equally as important, and clients are pointing out that lawyers and law firms can no longer forget that.

Jordan Furlong: Stay Reactive to be Proactive

Jordan Furlong, Principal of Law21, is a legal market analyst and forecaster, whose advice is to stay reactive to be proactive.

There were many lawyers and law firms who held their breath through the crises of 2008-2009, hoping to come through the other side somewhat unscathed. Many that did knew that it was a signpost for change, but there were still some that breathed a sigh of relief and went back to doing things the way they’d always been done. Bad idea, says Furlong (and many others, for that matter).

He suggests taking a page from his son’s little league coach, and always be on the move so that you’re ready for the next thing that’s coming at you.

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The legal market right now is a kaleidoscope of motion - countless elements moving at varying speeds in multiple directions on different planes. If your firm is stationary, it's going to get hit, repeatedly, from several unexpected directions at once.”

This is where a sense of agility and flexibility comes in very handy – you want to be adaptable. But it's more than just being reactive, cautions Furlong. You want to be SO reactive that you're actually being PROACTIVE:

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Instil not just a sense of urgency among your equity owners and employees, but also an ethic of continuous responsiveness. Help your people understand that this isn't a one-time crisis, but an ongoing process of market adjustment that requires fluid, real-time reaction. Don't just wait to see what other firms are doing so you can copy them. Be the firm others try to copy - and do it so well that they don't stand a chance.”

Firms so often want to be first to be second. But what would happen if you were just first?

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