

Gaining the Managing Partner's Support

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One of the challenges of being a marketing director in a law firm is gaining the managing partner's support for your marketing ideas and initiatives. Even in firms with active marketing programs, managing partners often appear disengaged from the marketing process. Fortunately, gaining the managing partner's support, although it may be difficult, is not impossible.

Obtaining the managing partner's support is a sales process, not unlike any other high-pressure, high-involvement sales situation. Clients - in this case, managing partners - prefer to buy from the people they know and like. Not only must your ideas have merit, but in order for them to be truly heard, you must be able to reveal the following personal qualities.

Establish Credibility and Trustworthiness

Credibility and trustworthiness are necessary for gaining support. These qualities build up over time in a relationship, and in small increments. If you are new to your current position, be careful to do even the smallest, most basic things well. Don't promise more than you can deliver, and when you promise something, make sure it gets done in a timely manner. Keeping promises builds trust.

Be a Team Player

You are more likely to win the managing partner's support if you demonstrate that you are a member of the team. Consider arriving at work early and staying late. Consider packaging yourself (dressing, speaking and acting) like the other members of the team. Also, make sure that your marketing initiatives are for the benefit of the firm, and not your personal self-aggrandizement.

Start Small

We all want to achieve greatness at our jobs and for our firms. But, in the beginning, select a few projects that can be done quickly and well, in order to overcome inertia. In baseball parlance, think singles and doubles, not grand slams. It will be easier to get your management team saying "yes" to bigger projects, if the smaller things have gone well. Word will begin to spread naturally that these successes are occurring. Having others say good things about your work is always more powerful than spreading the word yourself.

Focus on Needs

When selecting projects, always include the projects that the managing partner cares about most. Even if you believe that another project has more merit, or would be more rewarding or fun, you will find that support comes easier for those projects the client prefers. People are more likely to give you their support when you help them deal with problems that **they** perceive to be important.

Let Others Have Ownership of Ideas

People are more likely to support those ideas which they think of as their own. So, even when an idea is yours, getting management to believe it is their idea will ease the buy-in process. You can move mountains if you don't care who gets the credit.

If the managing partner does not immediately recognize that a problem worth solving exists, then craft a series of questions to lead him or her to that insight. People are willing to learn (or to buy), but they are rarely willing to be taught (or be sold). Questions such as, "What would happen if," are often successful in raising consciousness.

Another technique for getting others to think your ideas are their ideas is to express your thoughts in their words. Survey all of the lawyers in your firm with a few quick questions. One question you could ask would be, "If we are going to change one and only one thing about our marketing, what would that one thing be?" Then use some of the vocabulary provided in survey responses as you frame your proposals.

For example, perhaps a number of lawyers mentioned a need for more cross-selling. You could gain support for a related project—an internal news communication vehicle—by saying, "Partners reported a need for more cross-selling. In order to cross-sell more effectively, it would be valuable for our lawyers to share information about their clients and practice areas. I suggest we begin a series of regular internal news alerts including new matters, recent successes, and partner profiles." By using their words, you give them the feeling of ownership.

Be Visible

The more you make your presence known in a positive context, the more likely you are to win the respect and support of others. So, make sure that you report to the managing partner frequently on the progress of your activities. You may want to consider providing detailed written reports on a weekly or monthly basis which

describe your goals, the steps you've taken, any obstacles you have encountered, and of course, your successes. Consistent feedback communicates that you are conscientious, organized and responsible, and that you take pride in the quality of your work.

Align Communication Styles

In communicating with managing partners, observe their style and adapt to it in your presentations. For example, is the managing partner analytical? If so, then provide data and detail following your executive summary. If he or she is a 'cut-to-the-chase' type, then get to the point quickly and in a no-nonsense fashion. Skip most, if not all, of the small talk. Numbers, statistics, evidence, and analysis may be more persuasive for some. Stories and anecdotes may work better for others. Are they at their best and more available in the morning? Then plan and act accordingly. Don't send e-mail message after e-mail message if they prefer voice mail. If they speak slowly, slow down. If their speech is rapid, yours should be also. If they lean forward, passionate about their topic, don't lounge in your chair with relaxed body language. In other words, when in Rome, act like the Romans.

Don't Insist, Persist

A caution appears in a booklet prepared by the California Department of Motor Vehicles. It warns, "Don't insist on the right of way." Indeed. Better to lose a battle than to lose the war. Think long-term. Plant the seed for a project and walk away. Let it germinate without turning up the ground incessantly to check progress. With time, much can be accomplished. After the first few successes, buy-in will occur more readily, more frequently, and more fully. Buy-in for bigger, riskier, and possibly more-valuable projects will be within reach.

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