

Incremental Innovation Key to Practice Growth

LAW: Skill as Digital Networker Essential to Success for All Lawyers

By RANDY FRISCH

As the economy continues to take its toll on attorneys practicing in the largest firms to attorneys practicing on their own, **Ari Kaplan** has some advice. Look for incremental innovation.

"Lots of us think the definition of innovation is the iPhone, so if I don't have an idea as big as the iPhone we don't even try," he told an audience of California and Nevada attorneys gathered last week at the **Hotel del Coronado**. "The key to building your practice — no matter its size — is to offer incremental innovation. Clients are looking for visible, enthusiastic experts. That's got to be you."

Kaplan said the breadth of this economic reality came to him during a cab ride in Kansas. The cab driver offered him a bottle of water. "I'm a New Yorker," he said. "I am shocked when a cab doesn't question where I want to go."

A cab ride, certainly a commodity service, is incrementally better when the cab driver does something special like offer a bottle of water. "Unfortunately, for a lot of potential clients, legal work is a commodity," Kaplan said. "If one firm charges \$200 an hour and another \$300 per hour, most potential clients think all things are equal so I'll go with the \$200 per hour firm. Our job is to incrementally innovate to demonstrate

the difference. What is your law firm's 'bottle of water?'"

Digital Networking

Kaplan believes the most effective way to provide that difference is to network better, particularly with the new range of digital products available to law firms. These new tools — blogs, **Twitter** feeds, **LinkedIn** groups and personal websites — offer attorneys ways to promote themselves in a new way. "It's never about promoting yourself, though," he advised. "It's about promoting others in a way that reflects positively on you. You get the glow of good work."

Eric Ganci of **Galente Ganci, APC** agrees. "It is the easiest and cheapest way for attorneys in any size firm to stay connected to clients and potential clients," Ganci said. "It's imperative for lawyers to stay connected."

Ganci writes a blog and offers free videos explaining difficult issues, without offering legal advice. "It just reinforces to those I connect with that I know my area of practice," he said. "Any lawyer would benefit from that."

Marketing Momentum

The random selection of an attorney isn't so random, Kaplan suggests in his new book, "Reinventing Professional Services, Building Your Business in the Digital Marketplace." Today, clients are asking others for recommendation, researching attorneys they have heard or read about. "You can no longer wait for an opportunity, whether you're with a big firm or you are on your own," he said. "This is particularly important for

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those who are in a larger law firm where reputation used to be assurance of clients coming in the door. It's not just pedigree and branding anymore."

Kaplan notes that he's seen law firms and solo practitioners attempt to develop or work to buy the perfect marketing plan. That's a mistake. "Marketing momentum is more important than perfection," he said. "You need to demonstrate that you and your work are relevant and connected to the current legal world."

"In professional service firms, we hate to do anything that isn't perfect, which is important," he said. But marketing today is moving too fast to wait for perfection, which doesn't really exist in marketing, if you think about it."

Ironically, at the same time, client expectations have increased in two conflicting ways: higher quality and lower charges.

"This feels really unfair, particularly, from clients who have been with you a long time," he said. "But it is the new reality, and you've got to find a way to demonstrate you are providing both, and then you've got to communicate that again and again."

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