

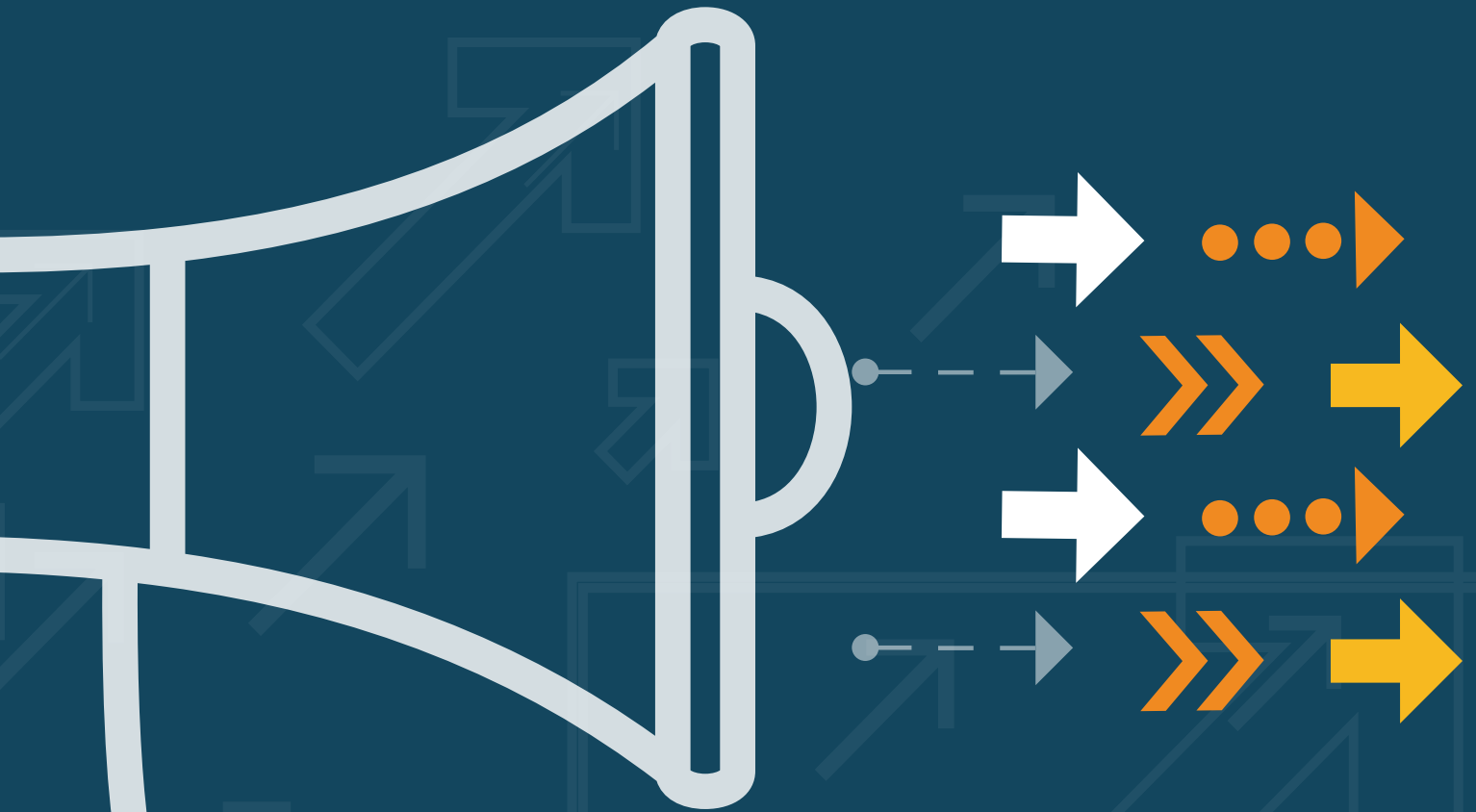


FIVE ON FIVE:

SECURING A SEAT AND SHARING YOUR VOICE AT THE LEADERSHIP TABLE

BY IRIS JONES

Five leading legal marketing minds answer five critical questions to help you earn that coveted position of influence at the table.



W

e often ask ourselves what it takes to be considered a thought leader by firm management and earn a seat — and a voice — at the leadership table. In this article, we will discuss the various strategies legal marketing professionals can employ to demonstrate their value and earn that coveted position of influence.

In addition to sharing my own views, and conversations I have had over the years with my director and C-suite level colleagues, I thought it would be helpful to include sage advice from a cross-section of thought leaders serving as chief marketing and business development officers. I have invited them to share their experiences and offer advice on their personal journeys to the inner circle.

The Importance of Being at the Table and Having a Voice

The proverbial “table” is the place where leaders are seated, important information is discussed and weighty decisions are made.

Why is it important to gain a seat and have a voice at this table? Learning firsthand about the next big announcement or the next innovation to be funded and launched is empowering. We feel well regarded and highly valued when our opinions and recommendations on significant matters are heard and considered. It shifts the discussion between the management committee and CMO from a monologue to a dialogue, which affords an opportunity to share new ideas, raise concerns and obtain important information about the direction of the firm.

In a thoughtful article entitled “Why Law Firm CMOs Love and Hate Their Jobs,” author Michael Rynowecer states that two of the top reasons listed for hating one’s job is “no voice” and “no respect for the business development and marketing department.” Both reasons can be eliminated by offering that seat at the table to the CMO. Doing so can increase the likelihood of executing a successful project and improving business outcomes. Granting CMOs a seat at the table also allows them to share their voices to ask meaningful questions in order to provide excellent service to the firm, attorneys and staff.

Advice on Securing a Position of Influence

One important point to remember is that you are not required to be a 20-year veteran in business development and marketing in order to bring your voice to the table. In fact, according to the third annual joint survey from LMA and Bloomberg Law®, partners are no less likely to engage with junior marketers (less than four years' experience) than they are to engage with senior marketers.

However, there are certain attributes and values that many of our successful colleagues have in common. Being prepared to take on stretch assignments and lead important initiatives for the firm demonstrates one's value and affords the best opportunity to acquire the position of influence you want.

I recently invited several of my colleagues, considered some of the finest legal marketing minds in the country, to share answers to five questions about securing a seat at the table.

These contributors are:



Wendy Bernero, head of client development for North America at Baker McKenzie



Michael Coston, director of business development and marketing at McKool Smith



José Cunningham, chief marketing and business development officer at Nixon Peabody



Andrew Scott, director of business and practice development at Seward Kissel



Patricia "Trish" Lilley, chief marketing & business development officer at Stroock & Stroock & Lavan LLP

What steps did you take to engage your superiors? How did you earn a seat at the table?

Bernero: If you consistently deliver value and outperform expectations and you are respected and trusted by the partners and the administrative team, you will earn a seat at the table. Maintaining a deep understanding of my firm's business, clients and core practice areas helps me stay engaged with the partners in my firm.

Coston: My current role was somewhat unique in that I was hired as the firm's first director of marketing and business development. It took some time to establish the type of trust and confidence among the firm's leadership that is necessary to be effective. It was important for me to develop strong relationships with the firm's leaders and demonstrate my value to them individually and the firm as a whole. To do so, I needed to clearly understand the leadership's goals and priorities (and help to establish those goals and priorities) so that I was able to contribute quickly to the most visible and important focus areas.

Cunningham: Before you ask to even be at the table, you should demonstrate that you and your team understand the firm's strategy and are contributing to the priorities of the firm. If you can demonstrate how you add value to the firm leadership's strategic vision — with concrete deliverables and tactics — it would be shortsighted of the firm to deny you a voice at the table.

Lilley: Employ all that advice that you offer to partners about client service in your approach to firm leadership. They are your clients. Do your best to make their lives easier. Anticipate their needs and meet them early and often. Don't wait to be asked to the table. Operate as a colleague. Set regular meetings with firm leaders, both attorneys and other professionals, so that you can understand

their priorities and become an advisor and resource to them. Leverage any outside speaking, writing or other professional activity to demonstrate to firm leadership that you have gravitas and respect within the industry as well. Demonstrate your expertise, strategic planning prowess and industry knowledge by arming them with relevant research, data and context to aid them in their roles. I have earned a seat at the table by ensuring that I am abreast of industry trends and fluent in the competitive landscape, but also by ensuring I know the firm, its peculiarities, its politics and how those influence our business strategy.

Scott: Communication is key. Through communication, I was able to become a trusted advisor to the lawyers with whom I work. What's important to understand — and I believe this is especially true within law firms — is that not every person communicates in the same manner. Understanding how each person thinks, acts and works is essential to relationship building. By identifying each lawyer's respective style of communication, I was able to effectively gain their trust. Once the foundation of trust was established, I was able to gain the position of influence I sought.

Why do you believe your firm listens to you and adopts your recommendations?

Bernero: I have a collaborative style, and I think I'm most successful when I can convince the lawyers to own and advocate for my recommendations. I do a lot of advance work before meetings, so when I make a recommendation, I already know where the support lies and what the objections might be.

Coston: Results matter. It's how you create credibility. When you have a track record of success, people take you seriously and begin to trust you and have confidence in your abilities. You can be

an outstanding strategic thinker, but if you don't have the necessary buy-in to advance your recommendations, it hinders your ability to be effective.

Cunningham: Firm leadership sees that I have no agenda other than the best interest of Nixon Peabody, our strategic vision and tactical goals. They listen to our team's recommendations because they know I am not trying to create a marketing department empire, that I am not looking to promote myself internally or externally to the firm, that I take responsibility for the times we fall short of expectations and that I stand aside to give credit where credit is due.

Lilley: I approach strategic planning largely from a "just the facts" perspective. I base my recommendations on data, to whatever degree possible. An objective, fact-driven approach limits the role that subjectivity and emotion can play in decision-making, and I believe that translates into firm leadership respecting my recommendations and weighing my advice objectively.

Scott: Identifying problems is the easy part; providing solutions to those problems is what makes people listen. My

firm (I hope) listens because whenever a problem is identified, a solution is also presented. Management trusts that problems will not only be found, but also solved.

What advice would you give your LMA colleagues who aspire to have the ear of their firm's leadership?

Bernero: Deliver clear value to all of your clients (lawyers and administrative), not just firm leadership. Practice what you preach. Always over-prepare for meetings and presentations.

Coston: I can't emphasize enough the importance of relationship building. It's the same thing we tell our attorneys about developing business. If you want to be seen as a trusted advisor, you have to be trusted. You have to demonstrate that you're competent, confident and able to add value. It's important that your personal brand speaks to each of these areas. It's also important to be proactive in identifying opportunities and/or areas that need improvement. Doing so helps firm leaders feel confident in your abilities and judgment. Finally, the leadership appreciates knowing you have your finger on the pulse of the firm. One way to achieve this is by developing relationships

at all levels in the staff and attorney ranks. This way, when you provide strategic recommendations, you're able to more easily build consensus around those recommendations to understand and then effectively communicate how they will impact the firm's culture.

Lilley: Be confident, not cocky. Always know your facts. Be fluent in the data. Anticipate challenges, objections and arguments to the contrary of your position or recommendation and be prepared to engage, unemotionally, on those issues. Again, follow the advice we give lawyers: Listen more than you speak. Take a measured approach. Operate with integrity. Deliver negative or unpleasant news directly when you must. Being a "yes" person doesn't serve you well in the long run. I would also strongly recommend finding key advocates and advisors in your firm who can give you feedback on your delivery, your positioning and your perception. While having substantive knowledge is key, you do need to present yourself in a confident, professional manner. Dress the part. Fake it till you make it!

EIGHT MOVES

TO SHARE YOUR VOICE AT THE TABLE

1. Be bold.
2. Be fully engaged. More than 70 percent of today's workforce is disengaged. Don't be part of this statistic.
3. Read, learn and grow daily. Being a life-long student aids in preparing for persuasion, influence and recommendations.
4. Be prepared.
5. Ask questions and bring ideas. Show up and speak up.
6. Report results and identify opportunities.
7. Be energetic.
8. You are a leader, so lead.

Scott: Be confident, but understand you are a part of something much larger — the firm, as a whole, is far greater than any individual. Getting management to see that you're part of the team, and working to serve the greater purpose, is key to getting folks to listen. Also, don't be afraid to make mistakes; shoot your shot. As Michael Jordan said, "I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed." You can't be afraid to miss.

What are the expectations for a CMO or director who has acquired a seat at the table?

Bernero: You must be completely discreet — if you are seen to gossip about minor issues, you will never be trusted with major ones. Know when to listen and when to speak. Always pay attention to the subtext of the discussion. Be an advocate for the firm, not any particular partner or faction. Do your homework and find ways big and small to be engaged and add value.

Coston: Leadership expects you to be a strategic thinker who clearly understands the firm's business, brand, market positioning, client base and vision. You have to be able to contribute and add significant value in each of those areas. Simply put, you earn a seat at the table when you bring something to the table. Commitment is also important. While CMOs are often seen as strategic advisors, it helps when the leadership perceives you like a partner or a shareholder who has a significant stake in the firm and is committed to its success.

Lilley: Be careful what you wish for. If you are part of the firm's strategic team,

you need to be fully invested in that role. You need to care about, know about, research and understand all aspects of the institution, from its IT landscape and data security profile to its client base and revenue streams. The expectations are that you are a leader and a contributor, so there is no resting on your laurels.

Scott: Expectations are always high, but that's true across every level. This question goes hand-in-hand with question two — management expects that you bring to them solutions, not problems. They don't want to hear about what went wrong; they want to know what steps were taken to make things right. Simply put, they expect you to do your job; fill your role and find a way to get it done.

How important is it to have a seat at the table?

Bernero: It depends on the firm. If your firm has a top-down management style, having a seat at the table will help you get things done. If your firm is a collegial democracy with high levels of partner autonomy, the leadership may have limited power. In those firms, you can achieve a lot without a seat at the table.

Lilley: The mission of the department should be to ensure the health of the firm's business and client development — both in maintenance and growth mode — so a seat at the table allows you to directly influence that. It makes your days a lot easier.

Scott: It's very important to be at the table, because that's where the decisions are made. In law firms, there can be a lot of politics, but ultimately, it is at the table where the final decisions are made. Being there — being a part of the team — enables one to put forth their perspective on the situation, a perspective

that may differ from the lawyers who are focused on providing superior legal service.

Conclusion

Circling back to the article from Rynowecer, he states, "CMOs love their job when they are making a strategic impact... have freedom to make decisions, have a voice and feel valued."

It's first about getting a seat at the table, but then sharing your ideas, your perspectives — your voice — once you are actually in the room to show the value a business development and marketing perspective brings. Without the CMO/CBDMO leadership at the table, an opportunity for an innovative, diverse perspective and a focused approach to future growth is lost. Furthermore, there is risk of higher turnover and burnout when an earned seat is not made available.

Bring strategic ideas, build relationships and understand the big picture at your firm, and the seat will be easier to attain and retain. If you are still not invited to sit at the table, when all else fails, do not wait to be invited. Simply ask for a seat and be ready to share your voice.

Remember, be prepared to answer the question: "Why should you be given a seat at the table?" ■



Iris Jones is the chief business development and marketing officer for McNeese Wallace & Nurick LLC. Iris leads the firm's business development and marketing team in delivering proactive strategy, service and high-level support to the firm and its attorneys. Iris serves on the firm's Diversity Committee, Professional and Personal Development Committee (PPDC) and the 2026 Futures Committee; she is also co-chair of the LMA Diversity & Inclusion SIG.



The content in this feature correlates directly with the Marketing Management and Leadership and Communications domains in the LMA Body of Knowledge (BoK). To dive deeper into these subject areas, head to the Marketing Management and Leadership BoK domain here: <http://bit.ly/LMABoKMMaL>, and the Communications domain here: <http://bit.ly/LMABoKC>.