The Real Holy Grail of Professional Service Firm Marketing and Business Development Effectiveness
by Suzanne Lowe

When it comes to growing revenues and market share, professional (PSF) and B2B service firms keep looking for the business version of the Holy Grail in all the wrong places: "Hire big-time rainmakers!" "Acquire that hot boutique firm!" "Revamp our website!" All too often, these ballyhooed initiatives fail to deliver on the expectations that they could increase the enterprise’s marketing and business development effectiveness.

Narrowly-Focused Initiatives Aren’t Working

Moreover, marketing and business development leaders, from both small PSFs and large global enterprises, are increasingly taking it upon themselves to champion initiatives they believe passionately will directly benefit the marketplace future of their firms. In The Integration Imperative (Professional Services Book, 2009), I discuss several real-life “effectiveness success stories”. For example, at RHR International, the organizational development and talent management consulting firm, the vice president of market development was pained to learn that his firm’s business development gatekeepers were wasting a great deal of effort and money by not forwarding the company’s thought leadership materials to their prospects and clients.

At SmithGroup, the architecture, engineering, and planning firm, the CEO and corporate marketing director could find no direct correlation between the marketing dollars spent and marketing effectiveness. The partners were busy, but they were just not generating the kind of return on investment that the firm had targeted. There is a good-news ending for both of these stories. In both instances, executive managers teamed up with the marketing and business development professionals and came up with noteworthy solutions that weaned their firms away from their ineffective marketplace practices.

Many of these and other narrowly focused initiatives to improve PSF’s and B2Bs’ marketing and business development results aren’t necessarily wrong. But they’re not working. To understand the reason why, we have to take a step back to get a view of the underlying problem.

The Root of the Problem

Professional and B2B firms must face the fact that they have a critical, fundamental problem: Marketing and selling functions aren’t effectively integrated throughout the enterprise. Their organization-wide disconnects prevent them from competing effectively, impede their financial success, and hinder them from delivering optimal client service.

The real Holy Grail is a lot closer than they realize. It can be found by ensuring that marketing and business development are integrated into every function. Marketing and business development must become part of every person’s job (although each person would have his or her own role).

PSFs and B2Bs should consider using three structural frameworks to connect marketing and business development functions together. I’ve called these frameworks the Integration Imperatives. The three structural frameworks pertain to the process, skills and support of marketing and business development. Firms can use these along with cultural frameworks to break down the silos that have crept in to their marketing and business development functions.

The Process Imperative – Expand the Range and Shine a Spotlight on It

The Process Imperative calls for PSFs and B2Bs to create a broader purview for their marketing and business development functions, and a better prioritization of all marketing and business
development initiatives. It also includes making the marketing, business development, and client service processes more discernible to everyone in the firm, and more obviously iterative.

An example of the Process Imperative is found in the accounting firm Moss Adams, which developed new marketing and business development integration tools that dramatically accelerated the speed at which practitioners connected marketing to selling and selling to client service. These frameworks and new cultural norms are driving strong revenue gains (even in a slow economy).

The Skills Imperative – Grow the People

The Skills Imperative calls for executive managers to reframe advancement pathways for practitioners and nonrevenue generating staff, and to more clearly direct the steps every professional can take toward competency growth in marketing and business development. Ross & Baruzzini, a small engineering and architectural planning, design, and consulting firm, provides an example of the Skills Imperative. They adapted a big-time performance management tool (The Balanced Scorecard) and combined it with a marvelous informal initiative, a “guardian angel” mentoring program.

The Support Imperative – Reframe Administrative Relationships

The Support Imperative calls for PSF and B2B managers to reframe the lateral working relationships between their firm’s administrative peers in human resources, information technology, finance, legal, and other operational functions. The Support Imperative is illustrated by two cases featuring collaborations between administrative functions aimed at improving marketing and business development effectiveness. At R.W. Beck, a management and engineering consultancy, marketing and human resource functional leaders teamed up on new performance improvement and organization development initiatives to improve the firm’s internal collaboration and shared accountability on marketing, selling, and client service delivery.

In addition to these three structural solutions, PSFs and B2Bs should consider using three cultural Integration Imperatives to connect marketing and business development functions together. They include the adoption of an updated, well-assimilated common lexicon about marketing and business development; the creation of new formal collaboration, shared accountability, and co-leadership models for marketing and business development; and the practice of making expectations more explicit about how everyone can contribute to marketing and business development.

Articulating a New Meaning of Marketing and Business Development

The first cultural imperative is to articulate the new meaning of marketing and business development for the enterprise. It addresses a particularly vexing hurdle to integration: defining of the terms marketing and business development varies widely from individual to individual, firm to firm, and sector to sector. Not surprisingly, one’s understanding of a term leads directly to one’s expectation about the role and function of the job. And this is no small matter.

In The Integration Imperative, the case study of Perkins+Will provides an excellent example of this cultural principle. The organization’s executive managers created a new lexicon, and renamed the enterprise’s go-to-market and client service orientation. For the people of Perkins+Will, integration is an ongoing, holistic, commitment.

Creating New Collaboration, Accountability, and Co-Leadership Models for Marketing and Business Development

PSF and B2B executive managers can adopt a second cultural imperative: increasing formal avenues for collaboration, shared accountability and co-leadership on marketing and business development. Sure, professional service firms do encourage their people to collaborate or share leadership with their colleagues, but typically these pathways are obscure and unevenly available. A friend told me recently: “I wish I could count on the work I’m having to convince people to do. All this asking and favor-building; all this monitoring, negotiating and coaxing. It’s a huge waste of time and energy. Wouldn’t it be better if I could hold people accountable?”
A powerful illustration of this second cultural principle is the story of Randstad, a global temporary and contract staffing company. Randstad’s marketing and financial professionals used collaboration, shared accountabilities, and co-leadership principles to transform their unofficial teamwork into formal structures that substantially increased the productivity of the company’s marketing programs. Now these cultural standards are hardwired.

Making Expectations More Explicit about How Everyone Can Contribute to Marketing and Business Development

The third cultural paradigm is making expectations more explicit about how everyone can contribute to marketing and business development. Many PSF and B2B service firms have made great strides in using internal communication when a particularly important internal “expectations” message arises.

But executive managers also must apply a potent new kind of cultural glue: reviewing and integrating job descriptions, checking and integrating reporting relationships, and reframing performance management guidelines to ensure that people understand how they are expected to work together in new ways toward meeting the organization’s revenue, market share, and client added-value goals.

A good example of this cultural principle is Haley & Aldrich, an environmental, engineering, and management consulting firm that created a pathway to a “seat at the table” for its nonrevenue-generating marketing leaders. By doing so, executive managers strongly diverged from their profession’s tradition of maintaining walls between revenue-generating and administrative functions. Their action sent a strong message that everyone is expected to contribute to the enterprise’s marketplace pursuits.

The Holy Grail Lies Inside the Enterprise

Sometimes, the best answer is right beneath your nose. Professional organizations must look internally to improve their marketing and business development effectiveness. Ultimately, when they apply structural solutions to erase their marketing and business development disconnects, they will improve their firm’s value to clients. It’s a competitive imperative.

The Author

Suzanne Lowe, the president of Expertise Marketing LLC, is the author of two books for leaders and marketers at professional service firms: The Integration Imperative: Erasing Marketing and Business Development Silos – Once and For All – in Professional Service Firms and Marketplace Masters - How Professional Service Firms Compete to Win. For more information see http://www.expertisemarketing.com.