

LEGAL MANAGEMENT

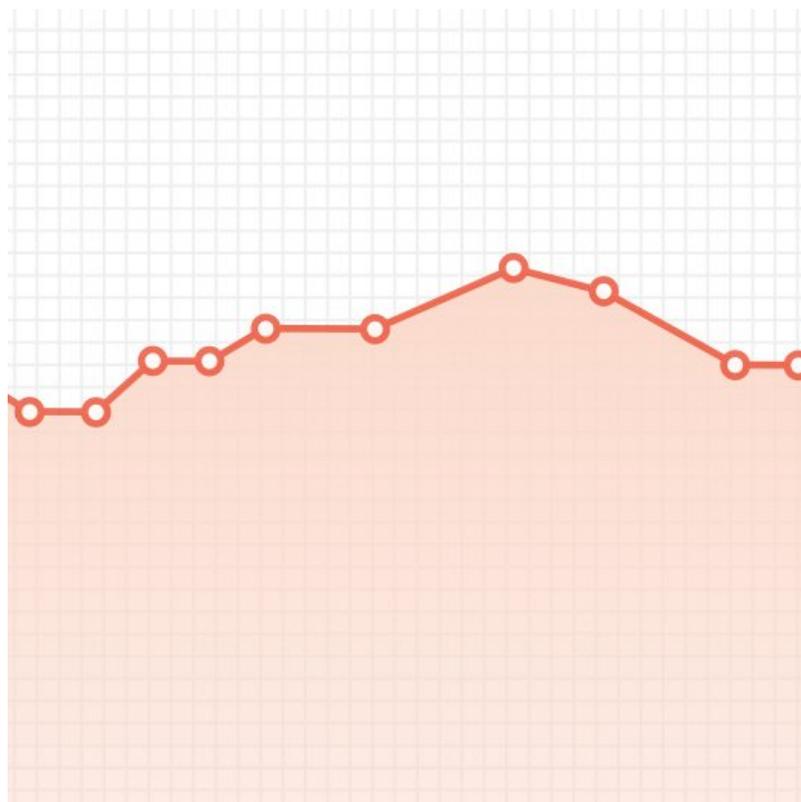
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Growth Trends for 2016: A Disconnect Between Aspiration and Execution

By David H. Freeman, JD

Toward the end of 2015, in conjunction with ALA, we conducted a survey that asked participants to rate growth initiatives at their firm: 1 = "This will not be a priority in my firm" to 5 = "This will be a top priority in my firm."

In all, we received 77 responses from legal management professionals, marketing professionals and lawyer-leaders.



These are the results:

Provide outstanding client service	4.43
Cross-selling	4.08
Business development planning	3.78
Greater exposure in targeted markets	3.74
Business development training	3.73
Lateral acquisition	3.42
Utilizing supportive technology	3.35
Leadership development/training	3.23
Client feedback programs	3.21
Differentiation	3.20
Client or industry teams	3.12
Lateral integration procedures	3.10
Enhancing internal trust and communication	3.06
Alternative fee structures	2.93
Tracking and personal accountability	2.74
Adjusting compensation	2.64
Increasing marketing/business development staffing	2.55
Merger	1.75

This data reinforces the fact that getting things done is often more complex than meets the eye.

While this is not an exhaustive, industry-wide study, it does provide a relevant snapshot that reveals some disturbing patterns. By looking at the relationship between different elements in the survey, one finds a serious disconnect between what firms say they want and what they plan to do to get there.

For example, the survey identifies the delivery of outstanding levels of client service as the top priority growth initiative. This certainly makes sense — in an increasingly interchangeable world of lawyers and legal services, one of the only ways to differentiate is through the quality of the experience clients have with their lawyer and firm.

A CLOSER LOOK

When you dissect the client service process, one key factor is listening to the voice of the client. Gifted client service practitioners understand that service is not a one-size-fits-all approach. They realize what might be seen as great service by one client might be deemed unacceptable by another. They also understand that needs change over time, so the best way to know what someone wants is to directly ask them. That's why client feedback is a critically important first step in the overall service delivery chain.

However, when viewing this data, we see that client feedback is ranked No. 9 out of 18 factors, thus indicating that firms don't fully appreciate its place as a cornerstone for achieving client service excellence.

Another example of this divide can be seen with cross-selling, ranked as the second highest priority in the survey. As you have likely experienced, effective cross-selling is a complex dance requiring many factors to work harmoniously together to drive intended results. One such factor is having a compensation system that properly rewards cross-giving and cross-receiving behaviors. However, in my experience, I see many firms falling short in implementing compensation systems that adequately motivate cross-referral activity.

Given that adjusting compensation received such a low score — No. 16 out of 18 factors — it represents a major obstacle in the way of effectively achieving better cross-selling results.

A red flag should also be raised when looking at other top factors, such as business development planning (No. 3) and business development training (No. 5). Few can argue that getting lawyers to create solid plans, and arming them with the skills to execute on those plans, are very important growth initiatives. However, as you know, success comes when they consistently act on those plans. Lawyers are notorious for falling back into old patterns or prioritizing current billable work rather than regularly implementing approaches that may take some time before they yield results.

Firms need supportive systems and practices to continuously remind, cajole, motivate, inspire and/or kick lawyers in the butt in order to keep business development top-of-mind. According to the survey, firms place relatively little emphasis on this critically important component of success (tracking and personal accountability, ranked No. 15 out of 18), which tells me there will be significant frustration when it comes to harvesting results from planning and training efforts.

In summary, this data reinforces the fact that getting things done is often more complex than meets the eye. If you are thoughtful about the key underlying elements that must be in place, and if you build approaches to consistently implement those elements in your firm, you will give yourself a much better chance of turning your aspirations into reality.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David H. Freeman, JD, is Founder of Law Firm Culture Shift. He's also a best-selling author who has written four books on leadership and business development. He has worked with 180 law firms and has repeatedly been voted the best law firm business development coach and consultant in a major nationwide survey. He's also a Fellow in the College of Law Practice Management.

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