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NEWS | SAN DIEGO

Local firms looks into selling the business of law

By DOUG SHERWIN, The Daily Transcript

Tuesday, February 26, 2008

Print E-Mail

Like any good business owner trying to grow his or her company, Pam Scholefield has tried a variety of ways to market her firm.

She's written articles, attended trade shows, given lectures and maintained a Web site.

Her latest idea, however, isn't as common -- at least not for the industry in which she works.

Scholefield is moving toward a more direct approach to selling the services of her construction law firm, **Scholefield**

Associates PC. Specifically, she's looking for an attorney with professional sales experience who can actively recruit clients, a unique concept for the legal community.

"Every other profession has specific sales people who are actually trained in the trade of trying to sell," she said. "Why don't law firms do that? Normally you rely on partners and name recognition. Why can't you hire a lower-level attorney to focus on that, where they won't be focused on billable hours?"

Scholefield knows from personal experience that such a candidate exists. She was a sales engineer for **General Electric** (NYSE: GE) for 10 years, where she sold electrical power distribution products for large facilities.

She was, in effect, a technical liaison between the engineers and the customers, who were contractors.

"I was an engineer who wasn't into design," said Scholefield, who now has been practicing law since 1998. "I couldn't imagine sitting at a drafting table and designing a piece of machinery."

As a trained engineer, she knew how the equipment worked and how it could best benefit a potential customer.

She envisions her new sales associate -- who must be a licensed attorney -- as being able to do the same thing: know enough to show potential clients how they would benefit from being a client of Scholefield's.

"I'm excited about it," she said. "We have people calling, saying it's a great idea. Everyone thinks it can work. I guess I'll be the one to find out.

"The key is to find the right candidate. They have to be enthused about what we do. They have to believe it and understand it in order to have the right amount of enthusiasm to sell it. That's true for any sales organization."

Count Larry Bodine, a Chicago law marketing professional, as a fan of Scholefield's model.

He said it's the most direct attempt by any law firm to add a sales position to their legal staff.

"I commend them for it," Bodine said. "It's high time they spelled it out. What you don't want is a law firm full of law professors. You want people who are business people.

"I always advise managers of law firms to pick the right people ... pick people who have a sales ability at the time they hire them. That should be an element of consideration."

Bodine is a former editor of the American Bar Association (ABA) Journal. He also was marketing director for the Chicago-based law firm **Sidley Austin**. In 2000, he launched his own practice, **Larry Bodine Marketing**, for which he writes a blog on law firm marketing.

He said now it's really difficult for law firms to generate new business.

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"The legal profession is in a recession," Bodine said. "Profits per partner are going down, and the usual uptick in litigation and bankruptcy is not happening."

One way to overcome this downturn is to hire people who can attract new clients.

"Law firms tend to hire strictly on academic credentials, and that's really a mistake," Bodine said. "That's too narrow. They should hire on the whole personality of the individual. What you're looking for is, who can make the switch from being an employee to being an owner?"

Bodine said when law firms need to cut payroll, they usually let go "service partners and library lawyers" first -- attorneys who only service a client and never open a file or ones who don't have any business relationships.

Scholefield said attorneys, at some level, are sellers, referring to trial lawyers who present their case before a judge and/or jury.

"That's the hardest audience you'll ever have to sell to," she said.

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