

THOUGHT LEADER PROFILE

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This is the sixth installment in a monthly series profiling “thought leaders” in the field of legal marketing and client development. Each installment will feature the thoughts of a different expert in legal marketing on a topic that they see as a critical concern. This month’s profile features Gabe Miller, General Counsel for The Law Offices of James Sokolove, the nation’s largest and fastest growing marketer of legal services. Profiles are created and produced by the LMA Resources Committee thought leaders Catherine Alman MacDonagh and John Cunningham.



GABE MILLER,
General Counsel,
The Law Offices of
James Sokolove

A Radical Client Service Model

BY JOHN O. CUNNINGHAM

For many years, Gabe Miller served the media, real estate and finance industries as both in-house counsel and executive officer. He was courted by law firms and held positions that many would envy. So why did he leave the corporate world to be the General Counsel for The Law Offices of James Sokolove, a nationwide consumer law firm?

“I got so excited when I saw all the things that law firms should be doing actually getting done in this operation,” Miller exclaims, adding that he was inspired by the firm’s mission of providing equal access to superior quality legal services. “I noticed immediately a true commitment to customer service here.”

He asserts that this commitment begins at the first contact with every “customer” of the law firm, noting that the firm operates a 24-hour phone center seven days a week. “If our customers can’t reach someone, they might go to the next name in the phone book,” he explains. Noting the contrast with his past experiences, he says: “I could communicate with a corporate law firm by voice mail or e-mail after hours, but that is not the same as getting to a live person in time of stress or need.”

Client service representatives answering the phones are trained to identify client needs and quickly connect callers with an appropriate lawyer. This is important because the firm not only provides legal assistance, but connects clients with highly-skilled lawyers at each of 300 affiliate firms around the country, handling 275,000 calls per year.

“We use technology to help direct calls to the right people quickly, and we monitor calls between customers and case specialists to provide feedback and coaching on service,” says Miller, noting that “this is different from many large law firms, which offer little or no service training.”

He adds that “our focus is always on the customer, starting with whom we hire.” The firm hires many employees with experience in other service industries, utilizing some in positions of influence. Miller points, for example, to Eric Van Horne, the Chief Service Officer, who was a senior executive in the airline industry before leading the law office through significant innovations.

Miller says his firm prizes creative service approaches, noting for example its MesoRC website, which offers community connections and information for patients and families dealing with a mesothelioma diagnosis. "One of the most important roles for our licensed social worker is helping to nurture this community as the members support each other," Miller says. "Committing to building and energizing a site like this is one way we see our client service as truly innovative," he explains.

The firm's emphasis on client feedback is also unusual. "From the first intake to the close of a case, we get and share feedback with our affiliate firms, which share our service philosophy," says Miller. He adds that this creates a recruiting edge, saying: "Good employees want to work for firms that are customer-driven."

Miller predicts that law firms of the future will make similar significant changes. "Firms will have to adapt, learn from other disciplines, and improve on recruiting, training and feedback to survive. Clients are looking to self-help services, off-shore providers and consultants to replace firms as legal costs become untenable even for commercial clients," Miller concludes.

Profiling Client Servers

Peter Roca, Customer Contact Manager for The Law Offices of James Sokolove, was trained in the financial services industry. "It provides a good model for winning sophisticated customers through better service in a highly competitive field," he says.

Roca aims to hire the right people by screening job applicants for:

- Customer service orientation;
- Education that includes a four-year degree;
- Compassionate, helpful and empathetic qualities; and
- The ability to listen well.

"We look at who our customers are and what their needs are. Then we find the right people to serve them," he says. "Our goal is to make it as easy as possible to do business with us," Roca concludes.



JOHN O. CUNNINGHAM is a consultant, freelance writer and contributor to various legal and business publications. He practiced law for 16 years and served as general counsel for both Pizzeria UNO and Chief Auto Parts (later merged into "AutoZone"). Comments and inquiries may be sent to him at C3cunningham@aol.com.

CATHERINE ALMAN MACDONAGH, J.D. is the President and Co-Founder of the Legal Sales and Service Organization. She is the co-author of The Law Firm Associate's Guide to Personal Marketing and Selling Skills book and training manual, which were published by the ABA's Law Practice Management Section this year, a certified six sigma green belt and, as a former corporate counsel, is a self-described "recovering lawyer." Contact: cam@legalsales.org

