



Living and breath

Helping clients become long-term planners is fundamental to the marketing approach in Toronto law firm Houser Henry & Syron. Managing partner **Michael Henry** and **Lisa Hegedus**, Director of Marketing and Client Development, talk Covid, client care and inclusion to Neasa MacErlean.

How often can the marketing teams of professional firms claim that they help produce better results for clients on the technical advice given? It is not frequently said, but when pressed, Houser Henry & Syron (HHS) is sure that its marketing efforts have this effect.

Michael Henry (who succeeded his father Robert as managing partner) links better outcomes to the firm's use of plain English. Some readers of this article might wonder if 'Plain English' is a fad which had its day in the 1990s. But, for Henry, straight speaking transforms client relationships and will stay for good. "Clients need to understand what we are talking about – as opposed to assuming that their lawyers will get it right," he says. "The process has got to be more collaborative and engaged than the old school way..." So what exactly are the benefits of this? He explains that, while the lawyers know the law, the clients know their own circumstances and, in particular, the characters they deal with. "The people always change the dynamics," he continues. "The client can answer questions like 'How will people react if we present a contract this way?'. And so, when he is asked 'Do better outcomes occur if the client is engaged?', he immediately replies "Absolutely".

The five-lawyer firm in downtown Toronto is clearly an independent thinker on marketing & business development. The businesses which it regards as exemplars include the Four Seasons hotel chain and Disney. "They have great customer service," says Henry. "For comparators on that we have to look outside the legal sector." The 11-person firm continues to

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annual ‘Mid-Market Report’ that Hegedus implemented three years ago. While the 2019 report highlighted various CEO concerns including disruption, the 2020 report focused on Covid and how C-19 has affected mid-market businesses. Despite the billions of publications written on the pandemic, this report – based on interviews with the leaders of these businesses – still finds interesting angles. For instance, fitting in with the firm’s interest in long-term planning, the report says that firms “with existing business continuity plans... tended to be more confident in their initial response to the crisis... [although] most mid-market companies admit they were entirely unprepared for this type of ‘black swan’ event”.

Where the firm had developed the underlying principles for M&BD, Hegedus has been able to build upon them. So, Michael Henry describes the advantages of being a small firm as being non-hierarchical and trying “to engage everyone”. And Hegedus sets up a range of actions working on that – the unscripted firm video (in which all lawyers take part); the idea of two-to-three person action groups which, she says, “came out of team-building exercises”; and “brainstorming sessions” and “a work flow meeting every morning which creates the opportunity to banter ideas back and forth”. One demonstration of that is the way that the firm’s newest, youngest lawyer suggested two ideas which Hegedus helped him implement – on reaching out to a university’s business incubator; and (pre-Covid) setting up a regular breakfast meeting with young professionals.

The action groups help produce the continuous improve-

ing client service

explore ways of improving the client experience – but Henry explains one basic step his father took and which he learnt to follow. He says, on the (unscripted) Welcome video: “It makes a great difference to our advice if we’ve been able to tour the factory floor...”.

This kind of (unbilled) visit round the heart of the client premises is the starting point for the “long-term relationships” which Lisa Hegedus was brought in to strengthen and develop three years ago. In 2021 she will be leading work “to look at the client journey roadmap” and to do more on the individual marketing plans that are created for each lawyer. This all builds on a system that the firm has established. Michael Henry explains another part of it: “We often sit down with clients and carry out a year-end review – just like an accountancy firm would.” He and colleagues then ask three questions: 1) What’s going well? 2) What’s not going well? 3) What is the plan for the future? “This gives so much more weight to our advice.”

This approach, when combined with the spread of coronavirus, created “an interesting side-effect”, says Henry. “Many clients have had the opportunity to plan beyond the day-to-day – either because of a lack of business or because of the challenges of it.” So, a far larger proportion of the firm’s clientele is now planning at least a few years ahead. Does that make firms more resilient? And, again, Henry replies: “Absolutely”, with no hesitation.

The close working relationships between Houser Henry & Syron and its clients is now reflected and built upon in the

ment that the firm believes it depends on. So, for instance, a three-person team recommended a smoother admin system for on-boarding clients. That now means, instead of bothering a business on various occasions, all the details are collected in one go.

Covid has meant that the firm has changed some of its techniques it uses in order to fulfil its marketing principles. So, if the physical breakfast cannot happen, online lunches take place instead. Hegedus will order pizzas, for example, for the lawyers involved and their clients – and they chat together over the meal. All sorts of variations are possible – and for a client in Switzerland, the catch-up might take place over coffee. “Virtual lunches and coffees work very well,” says Henry. It’s a great way to keep in touch. And it’s better than a phone call.” Houser Henry & Syron does not publish its revenue figure but Henry says that “despite Covid we’ve done very well compared to last year”.

So how will it fare now that the large Canadian law firms are putting more emphasis on the mid-market sector to replace some of their more troubled big business clients? “We have to do what we are doing, and do it better,” says Henry. “We have to keep looking at improvement, keep close to the client and set the Gold standard in client service.” Can it do that? His answer to that question also explains why the firm often talks about its founding in 1934 and its development. “I am confident we can do it. We have done it for many, many years. It’s the air we live and breathe.”