

How to Sell Innovative Ideas to Leadership

Hearing about good ideas is one thing. Deciding whether the investment is worth giving them a try is another. Professional services marketers and business development personnel often run up against resistance to innovative ideas due to management's aversion to initiatives that require upfront costs. To [convince gatekeepers](#) to overcome their risk aversion and relent, marketers must come prepared with a business case for the investment and, if possible, data to back up any claims of benefit.



Jaffe Staff

Two such ideas that might draw skepticism initially are diversity initiatives and alumni programs. Here are some ways you can contextualize these initiatives to gain leadership buy-in.

Why Is Diversity and Inclusion Important?

If professional services firms have more-diverse groups of professionals, particularly in management positions, it could be easier to attract more clients.

Federal civil rights laws date back to the 1960s. They embodied a changing society where discrimination became an issue covered by federal law. At the time, critics argued that how we relate to each other shouldn't be legislated by the federal government, but should be based on decisions by individuals and businesses.

Those positions didn't carry the day, but now more clients are deciding they want to use outside firms that reflect the make-up of their managements and/or customers, whether that means considering race, sex, age, disability or sexual orientation. We are living in a society where the core values of organizations and businesses increasingly include [diversity and inclusion](#). As time goes on, firms ignore that at their peril. If a firm won't keep up with the times and provide the services that clients want with the people they want, the work may come to an end.

The importance of diversity and inclusion will vary from client to client, but for society, it's certainly in all our interests that a rising economic tide lift as many boats as possible. For a firm, the upside of taking extra steps to have a more-diverse legal staff and management could mean more clients.

Furthermore, in today's climate, in which issues pertaining to racial equity are top of mind, failing to invest in diversity and inclusion initiatives may cast an image that a firm is apathetic or out of touch. While investment in diversity and inclusion should be done with the intent to genuinely achieve equity in the workplace, there is no denying that doing so also allows firms' brands to avoid reputational damage. Success at enhancing diversity and inclusion also can earn goodwill and even awards for progress, leading to better

reputations.

Alumni Programs at Professional Services Firms

Alumni programs are efforts to keep track of former firm professionals and maintain relationships with them. The hope is that goodwill and cooperation between the parties will result in referral work or, if the ex-firm member has an in-house position, additional work for a new client.

The first question before starting such a program should be whom do you want in the alumni community? Professionals fired for performance issues probably shouldn't be part of the club (nor would they probably want to be), but firms may differ on whether they want to include associates who simply didn't fit into the firm culture or who were offered, but turned down, positions.

Key tools to use include independent, password-protected websites (or at least a page or two on the firm's website), a LinkedIn group, and social media posts. What's interesting about these efforts is that the content, paid for by the firm, would trumpet the success of those who no longer work there. A network of potentially hundreds or thousands of professionals could see what a great job a person is doing and refer work to a particular alumni member.

There are no guarantees that any alumni marketing effort will be effective, but maintaining good relationships with as many people as possible is always a good idea. For example, a huge percentage of most law firms' work is generated through [networking](#) of one sort or another. An alumni program is just another way to encourage and leverage another important group of people who could generate business for a firm. Generating just one new client could more than pay for the cost of an alumni program.

Feelings Are One Thing, Facts Are Another

Either, or both, of these efforts may be a good idea for your firm. Employing professionals from diverse backgrounds and maintaining positive relations with former members of the firm are feel-good proposals, but if you track the work and successes, you can justify continuing the efforts based on more than generating positive feelings. Was the fact that a firm's workforce and management are diverse help win a client? How much being billed is the result of a firm's former colleague connecting back? Firms need effective efforts to help bring in more work, and data showing those efforts are yielding positive results will keep them going.

Do you need assistance with building your diversity program or alumni network? Contact Terry M. Isner at tisner@jaffepr.com.

(This article was revised December 2, 2020.)