



Finding Your Niche — The Smart Way To Market Yourself

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CORPORATE FOLKLORE ABOUNDS WITH STORIES about the catastrophic failures of some once well-advertised products, such as the Ford Edsel, New Coke, and Japanese Pampers. New product introductions aren't always successful; sometimes they can be colossal flops. For one reason or another, certain consumer items fail to find a market niche. Their names live on only as footnotes in grad school texts.

But some corporate marketing departments, after careful and extensive research, have correctly identified a certain market niche, introduced a new product, and then realized a phenomenally successful outcome. For example, consider the stunning success that followed the debut of a new product by Victoria's Secret.

Over the years, Victoria's Secret outlets have used light classical CDs to enhance the ambiance of their stores. Customers seemed to enjoy shopping to the lilting background music of Mozart, Corelli, and Vivaldi and often asked where they could buy the recordings. After hearing many anecdotes about this customer interest, someone in upper management wondered whether these queries might hint of a new niche—an untapped market for a series of in-house CDs they could label "Victoria's Secret Music."

Before Victoria's Secret invested time and money into a new line of CDs, management wisely decided to validate its marketing hunch with field testing—five months of nationwide customer surveys and six months of on-site interviews with store managers. The feedback from this research was overwhelmingly positive. Victoria's Secret's clientele enjoyed shopping to the light classical airs of Mozart and Vivaldi, and they wanted to hear more.

On the basis of this positive customer response, the company then decided to produce some recordings of its own: light classical CDs to be sold only at points-of-purchase. Their next step was to hire the London Symphony, fly the entire orchestra and its musical instruments to Nashville, and record original versions of these popular classics on six CDs. At last report, three of the recordings have gone platinum. The company's discovery of a unique sales niche and its subsequent introduction of a new product line, "Victoria's Secret Music," proved to be a remarkable marketing success.

Look Before You Leap

The lesson is clear: You do not introduce a new product simply because you have a hunch or "feel" it will sell. Careful market analysis and information gathering—through focus groups, listening sessions, and customer surveys—should first validate the creative insight and always precede new product design and introduction.



Looking for a new job, or making a career change, is a similar process. It is introducing a new “product”—you. We all have certain presuppositions about our market niche and the value of our particular legal skills. Often, these assumptions about our marketability are right on target. For example, your portable business certainly qualifies you for a substantial six-figure income as a partner of a civil litigation firm, or you should be doing transactional work in the legal department of a corporation, or your writing skills suggest a niche as an editor with a national legal publisher.

But at other times, some lawyers’ job expectations can be wildly unrealistic. Consider a recent law school graduate with a 2.5 GPA and no summer experience as a law clerk. He complains bitterly that his law school’s career development office did not help him find a job. His career goal: a position in the litigation department of a firm specializing in sports law that would pay him a starting salary of at least \$125,000.

Test Market Your New “Product”

Before you introduce your new “product” to the legal marketplace, it makes sense that you obtain some objective feedback, some honest advice, about the reality of your assumptions, the marketability of your skills, and the validity of your intended new directions. To the best of your ability, you must not only identify, but also field test your credentials in your perceived market niche. Otherwise, you could flood the mail with letters answering last week’s legal classifieds and spend the rest of the month waiting for the phone to ring. One of the best ways to do this is to consult with a job counselor, recruiter, or employment advocate.

Consider this example:

Howard Lardner was a senior partner in a small insurance defense firm. He had worked in this area of the law ever since law school, but with his firm’s eroding market and his own declining interest in the practice of law; Howard began thinking about changing careers.

Over the years, he had lead alumni fund-raising drives for his Ivy League college and had obtained several large corporate endowments for his alma mater. Howard greatly enjoyed fund-raising at the corporate level and, in his mid 40s, felt sure he could build upon his volunteer fund-raising efforts and begin a new career in institutional development with a college or a private a foundation.

Howard upgraded his resume and began his job search by answering advertisements from national newspapers and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. After 10 weeks, he received only two interviews, but no job offers. So he sought some advice from friends and social contacts—several local college administrators and one or two executives at a private foundation.

From these interviews came the same honest assessment: Howard’s fund-raising and financial credentials were excellent, and his presentation skills superior, but his resume lacked an



essential credential, professional development experience. One of his contacts suggested that Howard begin acquiring that credential by seeking a “transitional” position in development for a private secondary school or a community nonprofit.

About this time, Howard’s wife heard from a former teacher that St. Barnabas, her prep school, was looking for a Director of Development. Howard applied, was interviewed and offered the position at a starting salary of \$35,000, far below his level of income as a lawyer. But Howard felt the position was worth the experience. He accepted the school’s offer. Eighteen months later, with the St. Barnabas credential on his resume, Howard tested the market again and obtained an excellent position in institutional development with the Whitby Foundation, a prestigious private museum.

Career Marketing Research

The generic term for career self-marketing research is “networking.” Unfortunately, this word has been tainted by some job seekers’ ignorance of how to network effectively. Networking for some people connotes anxious phone calls to friends and family asking for job leads or exploitative job seekers cruising social gatherings handing out business cards by the dozens and badgering totally unknown people for job leads. For these reasons, I prefer to describe genuine networking and informational interviewing as “career marketing research.”

The specific marketing research technique or information-gathering method—something very similar to focus groups or customer surveys—is called “informational interviewing.” Career marketing research, if used correctly, will provide you with the necessary feedback, the information you need, to define your directions and assist you in making valid choices about your professional and career directions. It has the added advantage of enabling you to meet firm or company decision makers, so that at the same time that you are gathering the information, you are also talking face-to-face with potential employers. You are marketing your own new “product.”

How You Benefit

In addition to the great advantage of market research and the validation (or fine-tuning) of your personal insights about your professional niche, self-marketing research can also enhance your career search in several other significant ways:

1. You develop your interviewing skills

Many lawyers, no matter how experienced in representing their clients, are ill-prepared for the dynamics of contemporary job interviewing. For most legal professionals, it usually has been several years since their last job search, and their self-presentation skills are rusty. Because they are not practiced at marketing themselves, they try to “wing it,” as if in a courtroom, and their inability to clearly articulate their experience and accomplishments often contaminates the communication of their true abilities.



Self-marketing meetings will hone your interviewing skills. After scripting your message and practicing for these information-gathering interviews, you will find yourself better able to articulate your accomplishments and more comfortable in describing your career history. You will also be better prepared for unexpected questions and much more confident and at ease when talking to strangers about your professional skills and career path.

2. You expand your professional network

The more we become involved with the demands of work, the less time many of us have for outside business contacts. As the files pile up on our desk and office floor, increasingly we live in a legal cocoon, isolated from the real world, interacting only with the other lawyers in our office. We are soon infected with a peculiar "tunnel vision"—not terribly knowledgeable about the local business or professional communities outside of our case files.

In much the same way that the U.S. Navy, during the Cold War, planted Sonar listening devices deep on the ocean floor to track Russian submarine traffic, informational interviewing activates a network of local contacts for you, multiplies your presence in the legal community, and monitors the unlisted job opportunities that may suddenly surface.

Take the example of Priscilla Alden's job search:

Priscilla Alden had been recruited her third year at Harvard Law by Myles & Standish, a 150-year-old Boston firm. In the economic slump of the early '90s, her firm went under, and for the first time in her life, Priscilla, a partner in the firm's securities division, found herself out of work. From July through November, she mailed out copies of her new resume by the dozens and contacted recruiters, but the results were not encouraging.

In desperation, Priscilla talked to a legal-career consultant, who advised her to begin a process of self-marketing. After learning the techniques of informational interviewing, Priscilla used her Harvard alumni directory to draw up a list of law school pals and her Rolodex, appointment book, and phone log to identify other lawyer friends and former colleagues.

Early in December, she began meeting with these contacts over lunch or after work. She wasn't asking for job leads, explained Priscilla, but because of the demise of Myles & Standish, she was at a crossroads and needed some friendly advice to make valid choices about her new directions. This was an honest statement of her position. "How would they rate her legal credentials?" she asked. "What would they do if they were in her shoes? Could they suggest anyone else that she should talk to?"

Priscilla was surprised at the generosity of the many lawyers who gave her a few minutes of their time. Because she was not working, she managed to average two of these self-marketing meetings a day, for about four days per week. From these informational interviews, she received positive feedback about her credentials, gained confidence in articulating her skills, and took



away a good number of referrals. By the middle of January, Priscilla had gone through her own list of friends and colleagues and was now meeting with friends of friends.

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In late February, her marketing meetings had lead to four job interviews, but for one reason or another, none resulted in a firm offer. Priscilla blamed herself for the failure of her first interview, feeling that she hadn't clearly articulated her background or her skills. The second job interview resulted in an offer of a position as corporate counsel, but this opportunity involved a much longer commute than she was willing to make. The third prospect was looking for someone who could bring more portables than Priscilla could offer, and she missed her fourth opportunity by a hair when the position was offered to the other finalist.

In the middle of March, a friend of a friend, a lawyer she had met in January, called unexpectedly to say that he had just had lunch with the senior counsel of a financial institution. An opening in the company's securities division had materialized that day, and "the job sounds just like you." He gave her a name and number to call. Priscilla went through a round of interviews, received and accepted an offer, and found a new and better position at a time when the legal-job market in the Boston area was severely depressed.

3. You rebuild your self-esteem

When leaving a familiar work environment, most people feel dislocated, suffer a loss of confidence, and even develop negative feelings about their self-worth. This is particularly true following a sudden and unexpected termination. Talking informally, in a no-stress setting, with other legal professionals about your business background or legal experience renews your self-esteem. It will also revitalize your self-confidence and help you appreciate your professional value as you move into the future and towards your new career direction.

4. You meet the people who hire

The informational interviewing process makes it possible for you to become your own flesh-and-blood resume. You tell your own story, describe your skills, and are conspicuous as a free agent in the marketplace. If this firm or company actually has a need and you qualify, then you are also first in line.

5. You gain referrals and achieve a huge edge in obtaining interviews and job offers

Stanford and Columbia Universities, according to the *New York Times*, conducted a follow-up study of the hiring practices of 80 branches of a large financial institution and found that of 5,568 job applicants to fill 326 jobs, only 441 (less than 8%) were referrals. However, 352 of these referral applicants (about 80%) were interviewed and they later received 35% of the available jobs. Informational interviewing helps you make friends within a firm or company and obtain warm referrals to job opportunities both within and outside of the company.



Long- and Short-Term Goals

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Occasionally, literal-minded lawyers, when they hear about the techniques of self-marketing, will frown and then complain, “But I *really* am looking for a job, and the interviewer knows that I’m looking for a job. So it’s playing games to pretend to ask just for information.”

The answer is the difference between proximate and ultimate goals, long-term and short-term objectives. Sure, down the road you do want a job; otherwise, why would you spend all this time and effort gathering information? And the person you’re talking to understands this. But your *immediate* objective at this time is not a job, but market research—friendly advice that will help you validate your own insights, define your niche more precisely, and enable you to make valid decisions about the direction of your life. It is not a charade. It is the difference between marketing research and actual sales.

Why Some Legal-Job Searches Take Longer Than Others

a) Ignorance of elemental job search techniques

Often, people plunge feet first into their job searches without ever really understanding the rules of the game or learning any of its highly specialized methods. They make contact phone calls without first mailing an introductory letter spelling out their intentions. Their materials are poor, their presentation abilities weak, and they are rarely practiced in the use of accomplishment stories to describe their basic professional skills. As a result, they short-circuit a very effective technique, waste contacts that could have proved beneficial, and come away empty-handed. Wiser folk plan more creatively and tread more discreetly.

b) Playing the game of “Let’s Pretend”

Sometimes people in a job transition, because they aren’t really committed in their hearts to the networking process and don’t understand information gathering as analogous to marketing research, approach informational interviewing as if it were a game of charades. They have the interviewing skills; they go through the motions, pretending to seek advice; but in their heart of hearts, what they really expect from their interviews are job offers.

No matter how they try to mask their real intentions, the insincerity of these networkers seeps into their marketing meetings and contaminates the process. When his or her meetings don’t turn up the expected job offers, the games-player feels more frustrated than before, and the person being interviewed feels exploited because his or her time has been wasted. A door that would have been opened is now closed. A contact that could have been very helpful in the job search, if approached in the appropriate way, has been turned off.

c) An inability to ask others for help

People often hesitate to approach others for advice because of shyness, a deep-rooted fear of



rejection, or even a lack of social skills. Nonetheless, informational interviewing is an enormously beneficial tool in the job search. It is so overwhelmingly productive, in fact, that most clients who are willing to learn practice the skills with the help of their employment advocates and make an honest effort to talk to others about their career searches soon discover that their fears fade. Informational interviewing becomes a “piece of cake”—an enormous advantage in their job searches.

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The Secret of the Successful Job Search

Like Victoria’s Secret’s new market niche, it makes sense to do some careful research before you introduce your new “product.” It may take a little more time and some extra effort, but if you play the numbers in your job search, you will discover that “marketing surveys,” through the techniques of informational interviewing along with advice from an employment advocate, will greatly improve your odds and, in the end, make your efforts worthwhile. The next chapter will show you how.