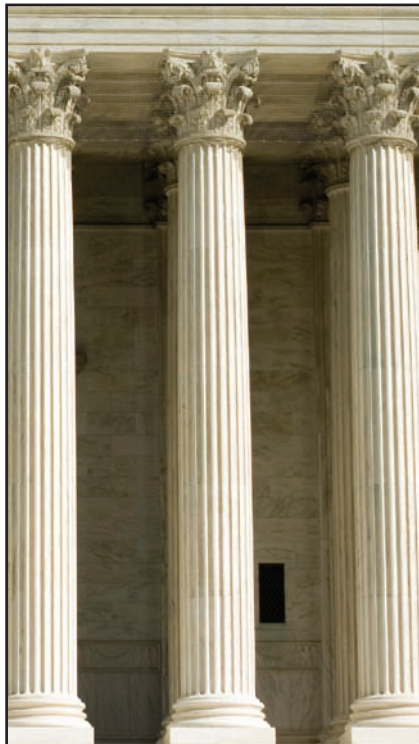


# Running a faithful business



By **DIANA SMITH**, Staff Writer

*diana.smith@nc.lawyersweekly.com*

Legal marketing specialists often suggest that lawyers become subject-matter experts in order to build a successful law practice.

North Carolina attorneys Tony Hartsoe, Joe Schmitz and Matt Stockdale can appreciate that strategy.

But they decided to build their firms on foundations of faith instead.

For them, self-promotion involves not only spotlighting their legal acumen, but their spiritual side as well. Hartsoe and Schmitz run a Christian law firm in Winston-Salem, and Stockdale practices with a similar philosophy in Greensboro.

Among other things, that means they will offer prayer or use scripture to counsel clients if they seek that as part of the representation.

It's an approach that legal-marketing strategist Margaret Grisdela has never heard of before.

"I once spoke with a firm that wanted to tap a religious market, but that's because they'd chosen to serve religious institutions," the Florida-based consultant said. "I don't think they got involved with praying with clients. It was more the practice of law within that field."

Christian-oriented law firms are a rarity,

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both statewide and nationally. North Carolina Lawyers Weekly could locate only a handful of such firms in the Tar Heel State.

“That’s because few firms likely market themselves as explicitly Christian,” said Sean Kirnan, communications director for the faith-based Regent University School of Law in Virginia. “It would probably limit clientele.”

And by extension, it could limit cash flow as well.

Hartsoe, Schmitz and Stockdale fully realized that practicing in a self-proclaimed Christian firm might not be the most profitable way to go when they opened shop.

That’s why it took Hartsoe awhile to do so.

“It was always in my heart, but I was scared to death,” said Hartsoe, who practiced in two larger firms before striking out on his own in 2001.

“When you’ve got \$100,000 in law school debt, it pushes on your faith a bit. But God kind of shoved me out the door and said, ‘Let’s do this.’”

He didn’t have a chance to put an ad in the Yellow Pages that first year, but it didn’t seem to matter.

“I worked half as much and earned twice as much money,” he recalled. “It defies every business model you’ve ever read. It wasn’t due to the power of my magnetic personality and my incredible marketing plan.

“God just brought people to my door.”

Today, neither the Hartsoe nor the Stockdale firms advertise much, except through their Web sites. Hartsoe and



Schmitz



Hartsoe

Schmitz also do short spots on local Christian radio stations.

But marketing strategies create a delicate tension for these attorneys, who take pride in their beliefs but need to keep their eyes on the bottom line.

“When I was developing [my] Web site, the people who designed it for me kept asking over and over again, ‘Are you sure you want to put that on there? You realize you’re probably going to limit your clientele by doing that,’” Stockdale said.

“And I said, ‘I understand that, but that’s who I am. If they don’t want to hire me because I’m a Christian, they don’t have to.’”

Hartsoe and Schmitz also take the expression of their mission seriously, not only in an effort to be up front with their clients, but to remain true to their Christian business model.

“It’s a constant conversation around here,” Hartsoe said. “I don’t ever want to peddle Jesus’ name and, at the same time, we know there’s a need for a resource for people who want [Christianity] involved in their legal matters.”

Hartsoe, Schmitz and Stockdale estimated that about 50 percent of their

clients hire them specifically because they practice in a Christian-based firm.

But because it is such a niche, none of the lawyers have a core group of Christian law firms in the state to communicate with.

Regent’s law school doesn’t have a list of such practices either, said Kirnan.

That’s been a problem for Stockdale, who said clients have often approached him seeking Christian counsel in matters outside of his practice areas.

In those cases, he has referred clients to the Hartsoe firm — the only other one he knows about.

“It makes it difficult when you’re looking to expand, because it’s hard to find Christian lawyers out there to develop a network.”

Also, having a niche practice touching on both legal and spiritual matters makes hiring more complicated.

Hartsoe never advertised for attorneys to join his firm. He met Schmitz at church and said hiring him was a part of God’s plan.

“When we hire paralegals, we do advertise in the paper,” he said. “We tell those folks right up front we’re Christ-followers and we integrate that into our practice.

“But you don’t have to be. You don’t have to endorse, even passively, that lifestyle. But you can’t be hostile to it. You can be neutral, but you can’t be hostile.”

**Editor’s note:** *This is the last of a three-part series that explored the issues that arise when attorneys try to meld their Christian faith with their law practice. Questions or comments may be directed to the writer at [diana.smith@nc.lawyersweekly.com](mailto:diana.smith@nc.lawyersweekly.com).*