

Identify Your Key Industry Target Markets, But Be Ready to Pivot Quickly

By [LawVision](#) on April 12, 2021

The classic business book “Who Moved My Cheese” illustrates through the adventures of four mice what can happen if we do not adjust to change. In the book, the mice are in a maze and the usual place for finding their cheese has been moved. Two mice stay to wait for the cheese to come back to where it was before, while another two go out to find the new place for the cheese. As you may remember, the ones that go out looking for new cheese are successful while those that remain are not.

The same can apply when we think about our individual target markets. At LawVision, we coach lawyers on making target markets part of their business development efforts. A target market is a way of categorizing a group of businesses that you want to focus on as clients. By targeting your efforts, you begin to build your brand in the industry and better understand the key issues relative to those companies.

Other advantages to having a defined target market include:

- Drives awareness activity selection such as networking events
- Allows you to do the type of work you enjoy
- Leverages unique strengths, including interest in a particular industry
- Helps prioritize business development pipeline process
- Focuses annual plan, including which companies to target for business
- Aligns your efforts with firm focus and outreach initiatives

In defining your target market, you want to assess strengths and interests. Do you have a passion for clean energy? Then seek to represent companies that are working on wind and solar projects. Assess where the group gathers. These are often industry or association conferences. Importantly, are the companies in this industry throwing off legal work that aligns with your practice.

Consider your current client base. Do you already have a critical mass of clients in a particular industry, perhaps a number of automotive clients? You can leverage that attend the annual car shows with an eye towards understanding where the industry is headed. It can be very helpful to build on the larger firm efforts in a particular sector or industry. Most firms now select industries that they want to focus on as a firm. If the firm is already serving the automobile industry, your firm may already have deep industry expertise, a cross-practice industry team, or specialized support around this area that you can use to quickly position yourself as understanding the broader industry trends.

As we have seen over the past year, however, unexpected events can upend industries overnight. Imagine if your one and only target market was the cruise industry. As the pandemic hit last year and cruises stopped running, a lawyer serving the industry would naturally ask “who moved my cheese?” While it will come back, the cruise industry is just one example of what can happen when an industry is suddenly transformed.

Going back to the automobile industry, if you had targeted the traditional auto industry prior to last year, you had a lot of catching up to do. At one point, the major US automakers were retooling to produce ventilators. That was an opportunity if you were able to assist your auto clients in this highly specialized area, but to do so meant 1). recognizing the need and acting on it urgently and 2). having the right colleagues with life science and regulatory experience whom you could bring into the mix immediately.

In addition, the auto industry is moving to a new paradigm where cars will essentially be entertainment centers. All types of new technologies, from electric batteries to lidar radar technology, are going to be crucial to that transformation. Lawyers who can do their homework, understand the changes, and problem-solve for their clients, will be the ones who stand out and are seen as business advisors in addition to legal counsel.

The pandemic aftershocks will be many. Companies are looking at their supply chains, and reevaluating how to operate in a mainly remote world. Certain trends before the pandemic started, like videoconferencing and e-commerce — were quickly accelerated. How quickly you can pivot if your own target market goes through a wrenching change is important. Ask yourself, is the industry I am targeting the “buggy whip” industry of the 1890s or is a growing one of those that is more of a greenfield opportunity?

For those early in their careers, picking a high-growth but still nascent industry could be key to long-term success. Understanding the legal issues surrounding such advances as blockchain, AI, and autonomous vehicle technologies can put you on the path to being a key player as these markets mature. The downside is that they may not be as able to pay top rates as clients in more mature industries. Discuss with your firm management or practice leaders why it’s important to go after these areas, and be realistic about how long it may take to generate significant returns. Enlightened firms will realize that they need attorneys scouting new and promising industry sectors, and nimble enough so that their firm will still “find the cheese” when it comes to identifying, and working with, key target markets.