Professional Perspective

Innovation Greenhouse, A New Model for Client Engagement

Mark W. Brennan and Brooke Haughey, Hogan Lovells

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It's not enough to tell clients that you are innovative. You have to show it. But where do you begin?

Firms should not "sell" innovation, but rather spark a mutually beneficial dialogue to create the right solutions for client needs.

Our solution was to create and launch the Hogan Lovells Greenhouse, a deliberately intimate group of clients that we invited to join us on a year-long innovation journey. We sought clients with a passion for innovation, and we intentionally aimed for a diverse, inclusive group that spanned industry sectors, geographic regions, and types of legal and business roles.

The Greenhouse is essentially our private club for clients who want to explore issues related to innovation. Through a series of focused private events, thought leadership, access to an exclusive online collaboration platform, and unique opportunities to network with senior-level industry peers, we're bringing our most cutting-edge thinking to the group for consideration, discussion, and evolution.

Why an innovation club? It sounded a little odd and some of our partners found it hard to embrace at first, but it's actually the calculated, strategic result of intensive internal and external efforts that have been underway for years. And while each firm must adapt its own unique culture and resources to optimize client interactions, we believe there are certain fundamental principles that can be adapted and applied to help you achieve an optimized innovation program.

Be Data-Driven

Part of what makes innovation so challenging is that everyone means something slightly different when they say "innovation." We've had clients tell us that everything from the most sophisticated joint collaborations to promptly addressing billing concerns can be "truly innovative."

So before you pour precious resources into crafting a program that may not even be aligned with what your clients need, do your research. Gather critical information across key sources: your clients, your firm, and the market at large, and continue to do so at regular intervals so you can refine your offering as needed.

While this may sound daunting, you can leverage a number of existing resources to come up with a data set without incurring additional expense for the program. For example, integrate questions on innovations into your standard client questionnaires, ensure that third-party market research is capturing relevant information on innovation needs, and hold conversations across all levels of the firm to further refine your approach. You also need to look externally and understand the landscape that your clients see. Look for sweet spots of underserved opportunity on both a topical and channel basis.

With respect to the Greenhouse, we launched an in-depth, bespoke client listening exercise with questions on innovation. These exercises yielded some specific, important data points: First, innovation was the single biggest driver of outside counsel selection, above and beyond anything else, including diversity (the second most impactful factor), cost, and other critical factors; and second, clients deeply value interaction, both with firms and with each other.

Get the Full Team on Board

Of course, all this great information can't exist in a void. You need your entire firm to buy in. Fee earners and business services teams alike need to truly understand why clients care about innovation, which specific aspects of innovation are the most critical to your client base, and most of all, how to feel empowered to initiate and foster innovative ideas throughout their daily lives. You won't have anything to take to your clients if your people aren't inspired to create it in the first place.

Teamwide engagement requires successful communication. This starts with clear and enthusiastic backing from management, setting the tone and the expectation for programming to come. At Hogan Lovells, we are fortunate that innovation is a highly valued trait and forms one of our key cultural values. But there are still numerous options to engage with management and thereby launch the program with its critical backing.

Find a Champion

Identifying a champion or champions who can open the dialogue with leadership and share some of the gathered data is a critical first step. From there, support can look very different depending on how your firm's management likes to communicate– can you work with them to integrate it into essential firmwide communications? Perhaps they would be willing to show support by lending their names to some of the early communications around your efforts, or tap key decision-makers to support and partner with you.

Communicate Your Message

From there, you have to work hard to get your message across. This isn't just true of the program you are launching, but for the overall cause of innovation in the firm. You can never count on just a lone announcement or two being enough to raise awareness, so you need to design a multi-channel approach that aims to touch each constituency multiple times, preferably in ways that are new and fresh.

Prior to even launching the Greenhouse, some of the tactics we used to call attention to our innovators included creating our own Innovation radio channel on a proprietary app, completely redesigning our intranet site with a host of helpful tools, calling attention to the tools with a gamified relaunch, and sending multiple messages across virtually every firm channel that identified and celebrated innovation throughout the firm.

As you think about how to bring innovation to your teams, we've found that there's still no substitute for the time you spend engaging directly with people. In addition to the broader communications blitz, consider meeting with groups across practices, offices, and regions to share the client feedback about how critical innovation is to their counsel selection process and to engage your audience in the next steps for your program. Consider developing and hosting a series of design-thinking based sessions for constituencies ranging from client partners to first-year associates focused on developing an innovation mindset and related topics.

Accept every invitation to speak or visit and don't be shy about asking for opportunities to have that level of personal discussion with every contingent you can reach in the firm. Hearts and minds are won on a one-to-one basis, so this step is invaluable in gaining buy-in.

Engage Clients With Hyper-Focus

All the internal communication lays the groundwork for labor-intensive– but incredibly effective– client outreach. Instead of blast-mailing your target clients (which is the simpler and faster route), individual client partners should extend personal invitations to clients.

But gaining participants is only half the battle. You should always be mindful that you must deliver content that is worth your clients' time. As part of the enrollment process itself, solicit feedback from participants about what kind of programming and topics they value most, and shape your response accordingly. You can also leverage information gained from client listening exercises, client relationship partners and client teams, RFPs, -billing systems, and other sources to shape your programming and ensure that it will inspire engagement.

For example, we planned our launch event to highlight a number of topics and speakers that we knew from the enrollment process would be of direct interest to clients, including high-level keynotes that looked at the future of the broader industry, external thought leaders who could provide guidance about building an innovation culture, and other hot topics such as crisis leadership and legaltech. Every session was strategically selected with our clients' wants and needs in mind.

We also sought to keep the event highly engaging, as Zoom fatigue is a real challenge. The agenda was fast-paced and included a wide variety of speakers, all of whom had slightly different styles. We mixed in pre-recorded content with team presentations and kept a high focus on interaction. We facilitated multiple peer-to-peer discussions and included real-time, hands-on demos of cutting-edge technology, all in pursuit of an interactive and dynamic experience for attendees.

It is also critical to seek regular feedback from the group and follow up the launch with regular communications to debut new firm tools and share thought leadership. Consider planning additional events throughout the year that further explore the themes of interest.

Follow Through—Over and Over Again

But even when you're not in direct communication with your innovation group participants, partner closely with their client relationship partners and support teams to ensure that any shareable information can be meaningfully implemented throughout the breadth of the firm's relationship. Ensure that the planning for your next touchpoints to the innovation group clients reflect their feedback and input, and scan the horizons for new opportunities which you can bring to them.

Truly commit to partnering with your clients to explore what's next together, which is exactly where you want to be.

Every firm will have a different approach regarding how to best engage with clients about innovation. We can't tell you exactly what that approach should entail, but if you follow your data, listen to your clients, and ensure that your firm is on board, you will be well on your way.