



## Questioned Documents Section – 2008

### J17 Marketing Forensic Laboratory Services

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The goal of this presentation is to impart some of the management techniques that have worked when the lab needs more or less caseload.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by providing some ideas that they may want to implement in their own laboratory.

It seems that forensic laboratories almost never reach caseload equilibrium; in other words, the right number of examination requests for the number and experience level of the examination staff. When there are not enough cases, the lab director needs to reduce the “threshold resistance” felt by the submitters and/or reduce services provided. When there are too many cases so that output quality is challenged, it is the lab director’s job to whittle the caseload down and/or to increase staff with the appropriate amount and type of experience.

Several techniques employed in laboratories where the primary evidence is questioned documents and the fingerprints found on those documents, will be discussed. To increase the caseload, all sorts of variations on the training theme need to be instituted. Road shows, continuing professional education sessions, quarterly newsletters or web feeds, laminated instruction cards, and evidence workshops may be utilized. It may also be necessary to supply physical evidence collection and packaging tools to investigators. Better customer service may also be helpful. The lab may need to work on its “branding,” which is a marketing term that is similar to reputation in meaning.

It is first necessary for the lab to figure out who their customers are and make contact with those customers. This may not be as easy as it initially appears; is the customer the investigatory agents, the agency executives, the U.S. Attorney, outside agencies like the Court or the public at large? Should all the stakeholders be treated as customers? If the lab is constantly in contact with their customers, they don’t have to worry about any competing jurisdiction or being “redlined” by their agency.

After that, it should be determined which customers are the satisfied, dissatisfied and unsatisfied. Contact needs to be made with the dissatisfied so that lab services may be improved and win them back as customers. Contact must also be made with the unsatisfied about using the lab’s services. (The unsatisfied don’t know about the lab or how the lab may help them.) This contributes to the branding of the lab. Some labs are well known and respected by the customer while others are not. In the author’s lab, examiners are encouraged to become certified, do research and present technical papers. They are asked to look for ways to make it easier to do business with the lab and to shorten case turnaround times. Examiners are requested to cheerfully answer all questions and thank agents for the work. Dealing with the lab should not only assist the agent by fulfilling his or her request, attempting to either identify or eliminate subjects, but should be a pleasant endeavor.

In order to decrease the caseload, variations on the filtering of case requests may be required. It must be determined which cases are going to do the most for the agency. Certain cases are clearly within the mission while others, which may be easier to work, are clearly not. Other factors, such as the amount of loss or a terrorist association, may take priority. Laboratories that handle administrative as well as criminal cases may make distinctions between their values.

There may be a means of screening cases and providing a “reduced” service. An experiment of reviewing all cases for whether or not comparison exemplars were on file will be related. If exemplars were on file, the case was passed along to the regional expert in that lab system to execute a complete report. If there were no exemplars on file, no comparison could be conducted. The next step in the process – dealing strictly with documents as evidence – was to determine if alteration, indications of counterfeit production, previously made links, or indented writing was present. If any of these were present, the case was once again passed along for report writing. However, if none of these things were found, a standard memorandum was sent out notifying the submitter.

Sometimes, internal obstacles, such as the workflow or too few essential instruments, can be changed in order to assist the examiners in expediting production. Accreditation efforts may need to be put on hold until the caseload pressure has diminished. Examiners may become very specialized in doing certain types of cases and thus, are able to work them faster. (However, examiners are not machines and this lack of variation as a steady diet may become boring, leading to greater employee turnover.)

Concrete examples of techniques which have been successful and unsuccessful in both instances will be presented.

#### **Caseload Management, Marketing, Lab Services**