

Building Your Law Firm's Brand

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Earlier this year, a certain West Coast law firm created enormous waves within the legal profession when it revealed the scope of its new branding and advertising campaign. The comprehensive positioning effort—along with a budget totaling millions of dollars—prompted many law firms to start paying closer attention to this thing called branding.

Can law firms really become brands? I think most people would agree that few law firms have developed strong, consistent brands to date. However, these efforts take time and, more important, reinforcement of a consistent message. Unfortunately, law firms are notoriously poor at sustaining marketing efforts—changing their priorities with each new managing partner, changing logos with each new graphic designer or changing budget allocations with each new fiscal year.

The Definition and Benefits of a Brand

A brand is the promises and perceptions that a market feels and believes about an organization, its products and its services. A positive brand image is an extremely valuable asset.



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When the brand is solid and recognizable, it brings many benefits to a firm: It differentiates the firm from its competitors; it eliminates risk on the part of “buyers,” since client decision-makers will not worry about people questioning their choice of firm; it helps attract and retain clients; and it cuts through the clutter of all the messages that clients and potential clients receive. Clients are willing to pay a premium for a quality brand.

What a Brand Is Not

To be clear on branding's benefits, it is perhaps just as interesting to look at what a brand is not, and what it cannot do for a law firm.

■ **A brand is not a logo.** A snazzy treatment of the firm name with an interesting font and use of colors is not the same as a brand. Although many successful brands have recognizable logos and symbols, this alone will do little to position the firm.

You can reinforce your position in the market through specific messages. Focus on a service strength. Then keep your primary identity consistent. Deliver on the promises that you make and the perceptions that you build.

■ **A brand is not an advertising campaign, slogan or tagline.** One needs to look no further than the Big Five accounting firms for a reality check on this issue. One firm's tagline is "From Thought to Finish." Another's is "The First Name in Professional Services." But do you know which firm has which tagline? More importantly, do they provide any compelling reason to hire one firm versus the other? Many successful branding programs do include taglines or slogans, but they are just a piece of the overall puzzle.

What a Brand Is

What, then, are the elements of a brand?

■ **A brand is what the market thinks of the firm.** It is about what clients and other firm publics think, not necessarily what the lawyers or the marketing department think. If you say you are a business firm but the market perceives you to be an insurance defense firm, you will need to engage in a repositioning effort to change some minds.

■ **A brand defines the firm's position relative to the competition.** If you are a high-quality, full-service firm and your primary competitors are of similar size with lawyers from the same schools offering the same capabilities, should you focus on your firm size, the backgrounds of your lawyers or your full-service capabilities? If you do, you have no position whatsoever.

■ **A brand must be focused.** The message should concentrate on one thing—a strength of the firm—that is repeated consistently in clear, understandable messages. Domino's Pizza focuses on delivery, for example, although it knows that people won't order pizzas if they don't taste good or aren't reasonably priced. Even commercials touting its new pizza products end with a doorbell ringing. For a law firm,

the focus could be on a substantive strength (such as mergers and acquisitions), although lawyers in other practice areas often feel jealous. Another option is to focus on a service delivery strength, such as technological capabilities in communicating with clients or turnaround time on documents.

■ **A brand needs to jibe with reality.** A brand involves a promise. It must be lived—and delivered—every day. For example, if your firm's brand promise focuses on client service, you need to implement programs to measure, monitor, reward and deliver exceptional client service, whether it's friendly people or the prompt return of phone calls. This points out the difficulty of brand management in professional service firms: While it may be easy to promise a consistent experience when delivering French fries or coffee, it is much more difficult when delivering intangible products and services. A firm is at the whim of its people, with their foibles, flaws and occasional bad days.

It Starts at the Intersection

A law firm should begin its branding process with an honest appraisal of existing perceptions (through market research) and an internal assessment of firm strengths vis-à-vis the competition. Once the firm has found the intersection of these two points of view, it can start to establish or reinforce its position in the marketplace through consistent and specific messages.

The Case for Consistency in Brand Building

As you strive for consistency in building your brand, here are a few additional words of advice.

■ **Don't take a name change lightly.** Small to midsize firms, in particular, tend to change their names frequently as partners come and go. In some

cases, there are ethical reasons for doing so, but in other cases, it is more ego-driven. If your firm has a positive market perception, you will lose brand equity by changing the name. In addition, you could create perceptions of instability or internal battles.

■ **Don't constantly create new images or directions.** One large firm created a new logo just one year after a grueling process to develop another, because lawyers were bored with the image. Your firm can develop many different campaigns and messages that continue to reinforce the same strength (brand), but your primary message and your visual identity should remain consistent. Research shows that one of the chief reasons people will switch "brands" is new positioning—in other words, the firm tries to be something different to them.

■ **Don't copy.** One law firm with a particularly clever positioning tactic tells of a number of firms "borrowing" its tagline. Similarly, a law firm discovered a firm in another market had simply copied its logo. Remember: A real brand will be distinctive and differentiate the firm. As the saying goes, "Go where others ain't." ■

ACTION

Further reading:

- *Marketing the Law Firm: Business Development Techniques* by Sally J. Schmidt. Law Journal Press, updated semi-annually.
- *Brand Warfare* by David F. D' Alessandro and Michele Owens. McGraw Hill, 2001.
- *22 Immutable Laws of Branding* by Al Ries and Laura Ries. Harper Business, 1998.

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