

Marketing Without a Vision

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"Our plans miscarry because they have no aim. When a man does not know what harbor he is making for, no wind is the right wind."

—LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA, c. 4 B.C.-A.D. 65

Do you remember the Gerber slogan? I'd be surprised if you didn't: "Babies are our business, our only business."

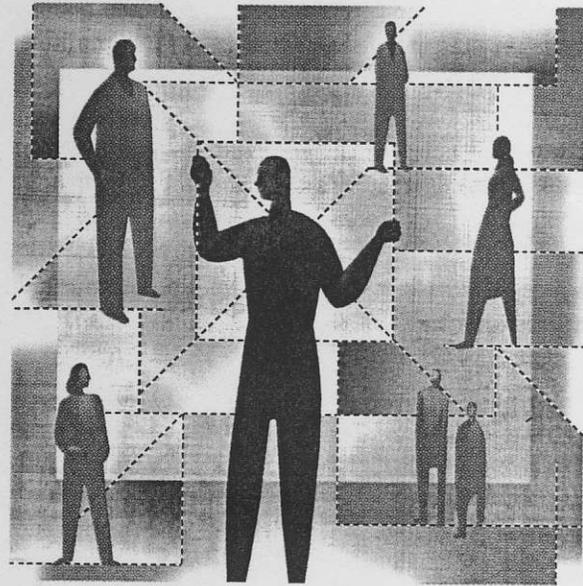
Now imagine that, shortly after running advertisements including this slogan, Gerber started selling frozen TV dinners for grown-ups. Or clothes for teen-agers. Not only would consumers be confused; they probably would question the soundness of the company's management strategy.

It's easy to believe a well-run organization wouldn't make this type of marketing error, one that so clearly demonstrates a lack of vision. But I regularly see similar examples in the marketing efforts of law firms. Consider:

- A law firm that built its entire advertising and positioning program around the fact that it limits its practice to one substantive area—and then begins practicing in another;



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- A law firm that represents plaintiffs in major litigation—and then hires a lawyer to build a corporate practice representing one-time defendants in the industry;
- A law firm that based its marketing efforts on seeking referrals from lawyers in nearby states—and then opens offices around the region.

Developing a vision for your firm can be difficult, but it's worth the effort. Firms that know where they want to go—and use that vision to chart their course—ultimately will be more successful.

Why a Vision Is Hard to Develop

Looking at law firm marketing efforts—particularly advertising, "branding" and other visible external programs—it's easy to conclude most firms don't have a clear vision. If they do, they don't communicate it very well.

There are many reasons law firms have difficulty developing and communicating a vision. For example:

- Firms don't give the process adequate time or attention. In their

haste to establish a marketing campaign or develop new business, many law firms develop positioning strategies or full-blown advertising campaigns that demonstrate a lack of vision and confuse or turn off the very targets of their efforts.

- Many lawyers resist anything that smacks of a fad. A buzz word like "vision" sounds a little too amorphous, esoteric or "touchy-feely."
- The lawyers cannot agree on the direction of the firm. Most firms

geographic scope, lines of service for the future, etc.

- *Widely held and believed.* A firm's vision cannot represent the values of just the managing partner or executive committee. If so, the direction of the firm can wax and wane with each election—which happens all too often in law firms.
- *Summarized in a short, clear statement.* The final work product should be communicated and shared throughout the organization continually in ori-

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are collections of individuals or groups of lawyers practicing in different substantive areas or serving different types of clients. What if the "vision" doesn't include or minimizes the importance of a particular practice?

What a Vision Is and Isn't

Although developing a vision can be difficult, it's worth the effort. When crafting a vision statement, the firm's management group needs to design a process that gathers input from all affected parties (clients, lawyers and staff), yet ensures that the final product doesn't become mired in details or short-term issues. As you work to develop your firm's vision, keep in mind that it should be:

- *Long-term.* Today's marketing efforts must not be undermined by tomorrow's decision. This requires that the firm articulate clearly what it hopes to be—its target clientele,

entations, training programs, internal communications, policies, procedures and actions.

Your firm's vision should not be based on instincts alone. The process should be studied and supported with external data. For example, how do your firm's clients and referral sources—and the people you would like to have as clients—feel the firm should be positioned in the future? In other words, what capabilities or core services do you need to offer to secure or retain their business? And what do your internal audiences feel? What type of culture will attract and retain the people needed to build or sustain your firm? Finally, what changes are occurring in your practices, geographic markets or client industries that will affect the future make-up of the firm?

Conclusion

It is difficult if not impossible to develop a successful marketing effort

without a vision for the firm. I believe this process will be increasingly important in the next few years, as the legal profession faces more competition from multidisciplinary practices (*i.e.*, large accounting firms), other nonlawyer practitioners (*i.e.*, alternative dispute resolution companies) and in-house legal staffs. How will your firm compete in the future? What does it aspire to be?

Keep in mind that the "visioning" process does have a positive bottom-line impact. In the book *Built to Last*, the authors reported on the cumulative stock returns of "visionary companies" versus "comparison companies." Comparison companies are those in the same industries but without the consistent and stated vision, direction and values found in visionary companies. An investment in the visionary companies would have returned more than 15 times that of the general market and approximately 6.5 times that of the comparison companies over the period tracked.

Firms that know where they want to go—and use that vision to chart their course—ultimately will be more successful. And they will have a road map to drive all their marketing decisions, resulting in efforts that are more efficient and cost-effective. ■

ACTION

Further reading:

- *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies.* James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras. HarperCollins. 1994.
- *Corporate Culture and Performance.* John P. Kotter and James L. Heskett. Free Press. 1992.
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