

Play to Win

# Differentiating Yourself

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What makes you different? Prospective clients and referral sources are asking that question. When making decisions on hiring counsel, they often struggle with how to tell lawyers apart. You say you are responsive? So does everyone else. You say you handle complex product liability matters? So do the other three lawyers I'm talking to.

Finding ways to distinguish yourself will help prospects with their decision-making but will also benefit you. Done right, it can help you develop the type of work you enjoy the most or the kind of clients who best fit your style.

## Differentiation Strategies (Beyond Your Practice Niche)

I am a big fan of niche marketing (and have [written about it here](#) before). Whether it involves an industry or a legal specialty, niche marketing is one of the most effective ways to differentiate yourself and build a practice.

However, there are many other ways to distinguish yourself that are not based on practice specialization. Here are some ideas.

## Approach to Work

Is there something different about the way you deliver your services? I've heard lawyers describe themselves in many ways, like:

- Collaborator
- Gunfighter
- Businesslike
- Technologist
- Plain English speaker

What is your approach to your practice?

## Background

Your background often influences who you are or the way you practice. This includes things like:

- Military experience
- Family situation (e.g., the first in your family to go to college)
- Exposure to an industry (e.g., working in a family business)
- A football scholarship

Is there something in your past that sets you apart?

## Unique Credentials

Many lawyers have unique credentials that can distinguish them, including:

- Language skills
- Prior industry experience
- Unusual degrees (e.g., LLM or Ph.D.)
- Certification
- Membership in a prestigious group

What valuable credentials or skills can you tout?

## Outside Activities, Interests or Fun Facts

Personal interests can help you build strong connections with contacts. Examples include:

- Playing in a community band
- Collecting classic cars
- Rescuing dogs
- Spending time with your five kids

What do you do when you're not practicing law?

## Presence and Style

I once worked with a woman lawyer who was incredibly fashionable. I still remember her outfits and the way she carried herself. People might associate you with:

- Bow ties
- Genuine warmth
- A vintage briefcase
- Chic shoes or cowboy boots
- A sense of humor

What do people come to expect when they interact with you?

## Turning Features Into Benefits

Once you identify the things that distinguish you, the important work begins: How do these features benefit clients or prospects? Lawyer bios or profiles often reference things like law review, prior work experience or a special degree — but why should a client care? Your job is to turn each feature into something of interest to a client. Here are examples:

- With an MBA in logistics, Dan speaks the language of the transportation industry and has a firsthand understanding of the issues facing those clients.
- In the highly technical area of employee benefits, Suzanne has a unique ability to explain even the most complex issues to clients and make the information easily understood.
- Carl's rural background instilled in him a passion for the outdoors, especially hunting and fishing. He has a particular interest in working with retailers in the sporting goods industry.
- As a former Division I basketball player, Cynthia believes in the power of teamwork. Whether working with colleagues or clients, she takes a collaborative, partnership approach.

## Delivering on Your Brand

Remember, it is never enough to say something about yourself — you need to live it. If you promise clients straight talk or a collaborative approach, you need to deliver. Every lawyer has a brand. The goal is to recognize and manage it.

*Sally Schmidt, President of Schmidt Marketing, Inc., helps lawyers and law firms grow their practices. She was a founder and the first President of the Legal Marketing Association, is a Fellow of the College of Law Practice Management and was one of the first inductees to LMA's Hall of Fame. Known for her practical advice, she is the author of two books, "[Marketing the Law Firm: Business Development Techniques](#)" and "[Business Development for Lawyers: Strategies for Getting and Keeping Clients](#)." Follow her @SallySchmidt.*