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## **Successful branding: it's not what you think!**

**Law firms that think a new logo or glossy brochures will bring in a flood of new clients are bound to be disappointed, writes Robert C. Sawhney.**

Branding is one of the most poorly understood and misapplied processes in the context of professional services firms.

Too many law firms embark on building a brand using the basis of a consumer goods branding campaign as their benchmark for what branding is all about. This entails significant time and resources spent on designs, new logos and nice glossy brochures. These same firms are then surprised when the 'branding' process achieves negligible results in terms of business for the firm or an enhanced reputation in the market place.

Even the largest law firms in the world have engaged branding consultancies and spent millions of dollars on new tag lines and flashy advertising while neglecting the people in the firm. They are the ones who live, breathe and deliver the brand every single day in their interaction with clients.

Branding in law firms is not about logos, advertising or new stationery – it is about the skills, knowledge and interactions that the human assets of the firm have in the market place. Branding in law firms is different because:

- legal services are essentially intangible and hence differentiating the law firm is both different and difficult
- the professionals in the firm hold all the capital. If they do not 'buy into' the brand, there is no purpose in branding at all
- clients will not choose a legal provider due to a new promotional campaign based on a new logo, image or tag line
- clients choose the individual as much as the firm, hence there should be a balance between firm brand and individual brand
- consumers in Asia are much more critical of professionals advertising than those in the West, hence advertising is less effective (Australian firms entering Asia be warned!).

In many ways, branding and marketing in law firms are synonymous because branding is about improving the perceptions and experience of the client and that takes substantive work on the processes and culture of the firm.

## **The branding process**

The previous discussion has hinted at the idea that branding, and branding a law firm in particular, is a comprehensive effort that entails many aspects of the firm's marketing and business strategy. Additionally, branding does not rely on advertising and the ability to invest millions of dollars in large-scale promotional campaigns. This is particularly true in Asia, where the limitations of advertising and consumer responses to it have been mentioned. Branding in knowledge-based industries is as much internal as it is external. Building a brand requires a business audit in terms of:

- vision, mission and business strategy
- marketing strategy
- firm culture and values
- firm history and background
- staff perceptions and needs
- clients and industries served
- client perceptions of firm
- services offered
- competitive environment.

A law firm must have a solid understanding of what the firm stands for and how it would like to be perceived now and in the future. By looking at this list it should be clear that a brand cannot be represented (except superficially) by a logo or slogan and that deciding on a brand strategy is a time-consuming process that takes substantial effort and commitment among many areas of the firm. It then becomes obvious that changing a brand and the perceptions of a firm again cannot be represented by changes in firm colours or stationery and hence any firm embarking on a branding process should take it very seriously or not bother at all.

Additionally, given the nature of law firms which rely on the human and social capital embedded in many practice areas of the firm, there is a strong case that branding should occur at the individual, practice and firm level, although there should be a unifying set of values and beliefs that bind the firm. For law firms with offices in multiple geographic locations, this will be crucial to create what David Maister calls the 'one firm' firm.

## **The stages of branding**

**Strategic internal brand analysis** – here the firm conducts an analysis of the firm's culture, history, values, objectives, capabilities and stakeholder needs in order to understand what underpins the successful and potentially differentiating aspects of the firm. This should be done at the individual, practice group and firm level and involve as many people as possible.

**Strategic external analysis** – this is done in conjunction with the internal analysis and aims to identify competitors strengths and weaknesses, market/client needs, environmental trends, as well as stakeholder expectations.

**Gaps and opportunities** – based on your analysis of the internal and external market place, you should be able to capitalise on the firm’s capabilities and the gaps in the market to think in concrete terms about your brand identity (the key attributes about your people and firm that will be valued in the market place).

**Brand identity** – think about key attributes that will describe your brand for individuals (e.g. trusted advisor), practice groups (e.g. cross disciplinary), services (e.g. innovative), and the firm as a whole (e.g. commercially and client oriented).

**Value proposition** – you can then work on articulating why people will buy from your firm and why the best people would want to work with you. Your value proposition should be valuable to clients, distinctive, credible and motivating to people within the firm.

**Brand positioning and image** – think about which elements of your brand and value proposition you wish to communicate and to which segments. Ensure consistency across target segments, offices, practice areas and partner/staff activities.

### **Pitfalls and final words**

Too many firms fall into the trap of creating a new image and thinking that is branding (the hype around shortened firm names and tag lines is a good example of this). What really matters is the experience and perceptions of the client. This requires a holistic approach to branding, one that requires strong leadership and commitment from all levels of the firm. In his book *Practice What You Preach*, David Maister showed unequivocally that those firms which lived by their values achieved better financial performance than their peers. If you live and die by the billable hour, the real benefits of branding will be hard to achieve.

Branding is not just about getting new clients, it is about retaining and attracting the best talent and ensuring that at the end of the day, clients receive greater value in the way you deliver your services.

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