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Branding a professional firm

To be successful, a professional services firm must concentrate on positioning both the firm and its areas of expertise (which is known as a “dual branding” approach). Branding and positioning, as opposed to advertising tag lines, which professional services firms too frequently confuse with a brand, have always demanded a two-tier approach at the firm and practice area level. Unfortunately, professional services firms have ignored these dual components, often at their peril. For ease of explanation, we have used the legal profession as the basis for this article.

In a legal environment, when we talk about a branding and positioning process, we are talking about how clients choose legal services at a most fundamental level. Prospective clients do not put on their shopping list “the Hard Working Lawyers of Do a Good Job & Co.”, they list problems they have and which lawyers (or types of lawyers) can help them with the solutions.

Every lawyer who has gone into a supermarket probably knows what this means in practice, yet their firms spend virtually all their resources attempting to “brand” the law firm, not the expertise or lawyers. But it is the lawyers and their problem solving capabilities that motivate prospective clients to buy. The branding and positioning of the firm is supposed to support these other marketing activities, not substitute them. Corporate clients have been branding products for over two centuries; law firms have been attempting it for less than a decade. To whom are you going to look for lessons in the art?

Developing an advertising campaign with tag lines like “Our Persistent Vision: A World Law Firm,” or “Integrated Legal Services,” may result in attractive advertisements. By themselves, however, these advertisements do not create any incentive for a legal purchaser to choose you. Law firms look alike, not only in what they do, but also in their marketing. Successful marketing means establishing a distinction in the minds of the buyers, and providing a solution to their problem.

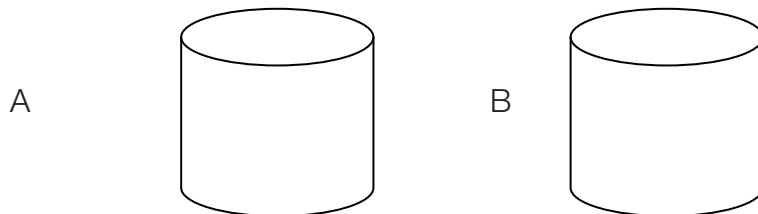
An introduction to Branding

Anyone who has children will understand the importance of branding. For example, how many times have you heard –
“I want a Bob the builder hat, not that one” or
“I’ve got to have Nike airwave plus trainers, Reebok is so uncool” or the one that I heard a while ago from a friend’s nine year old when I offered her freshly squeezed orange juice –
“that’s not proper juice, I want Sunny D (Delight)” – at the time a concoction of sugar, chemicals and colourings!

Even those of us without children will have witnessed these type of reactions in supermarkets and shops where a despairing parent is trying unsuccessfully to coax little Jimmy into accepting a non “branded” item over the branded and usually heavily advertised on TV version.

So why should law firms be any different? It’s not just children who are so picky. We live in an age where choice often seems to have no limit, so people can now select exactly what they want in their personal and business lives.

Look at the pictures below



Both cans contain vegetables. Which one would you choose and why?

In order to make an informed choice, you will need answers to certain questions –

For example, what vegetables are in can A and what vegetables are in can B?
Both contain baked beans.

However this won’t tell you anything about the quality of the contents, so further questioning is required – and this is where branding can influence a decision
You ask about the price - can A is 27p can B is 43p. Some people would now choose can B, purely on this fact – ie it is more expensive so it must be better
Who makes can A and who makes can B? well actually Heinz makes both.

So now it's a real dilemma, how do you choose? Here's how most would –

A



Tesco can

B



Heinz 57 can

Choice will depend on what attributes of these two products are most important to the buyer (ie what meets their needs). As we said, if price is a factor then one person may go for the cheaper version, perhaps on the basis that baked beans are baked beans so why pay more. Alternatively they may choose the cheaper option, although they think that Heinz is a better product. because the kids won't be able to taste the difference. Or it may even be that the Tesco's brand is strong enough, on its own, to compete with Heinz

Likewise, some will choose the Heinz product, as we noted previously because; it is more expensive and therefore must be better, inverted snobbery we only eat Heinz, oh we don't go for generic supermarket stuff or they genuinely believe they are buying a superior product.

To really understand and appreciate the importance of branding and how strongly it can influence a buying decision, it is imperative to drill down and unmask the factors (wants and needs in marketing jargon) for the purchase decision.

Here are some superb examples of successful branding where a firm has understood its market and has targeted it in very specific ways –

- FCUK
- Perrier water
- Weightwatchers
- Renault Clio
- Sunny Delight



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And some rebranding disasters

- British Airways - When BA decided to globalise its branding strategy, they painted the tail of each plane with symbols from around the world, and removed the British flag from their planes and uniforms. The British press had a field day, the cabin-crews went on strike, and business travellers threatened to leave in droves. British airways without the Union Jack?
- Consignia (changed from Royal Mail – so unsuccessful that it reverted back) - the media immediately ridiculed it and a very short time a it reverted back to its original name and the company announced job loses of up to 40,000 employees.
- Monday – Consulting arm of PWC, lasted 7 weeks and cost £75m before it was abandoned

Branding and the legal profession

The introduction to branding demonstrated that successful branding is all about having an in-depth knowledge and appreciation of what makes existing customers decide to buy specific products, what needs that purchase is fulfilling and then branding that product to meet those needs.

This thinking can and should be applied to law firms; after all, clients are simply customers, who for some reason have chosen to use your firm's services (buy your products.)

Taking a dual-branding approach, law firms should firstly look at the firm as a whole and then its expertise and/or lawyers and ask simple basic questions such as:

1. What do we want to be known for?
2. What do we do and for whom?
3. What makes us different from our competitors?
4. Why should clients choose us

Here are some examples of the 'deciding factors' from a client perspective, what would the answers be for Prettys / your department / particular service?:-

- Price (how important is price?)
- Location and decor (are you sure this does not matter to all your key clients?)
- Legal services offered (ie importance of range)
- Attitude (ie informal v formal approach)
- Qualifications (mix of qualified lawyers / legal execs)
- Experience (so what that your department has a combined experience of 45 years?)
- Standing (modern / trendy v traditional – kids on the block v old foggies)
- Age (some old boffin v some spotty faced youth or laid back elder statesman v up and coming eager beaver)
- Successes (how important is success / failure rate to a potential client)
- Communications (ie technology, email, conference calls, video conferencing etc)
- Communications (– clarity, regularity, does it fit in with individual client's needs or department's modus operandi)
- Response times (which clients want speedy responses, how important is speed of response to a client?)
- Efficiency (does the client regard you as efficient? Attention to detail (ie names / postcodes, even grammar and punctuation matter etc)

In the unlikely event that you can answer all these questions, then, you can say that you are a long way down the line to truly understanding your clients.

And finally, a recent client survey in the UK conducted by Altman Weil found that “brand recognition in professional services firms is worth a ten to twenty percent premium in fees” – so it can be worthwhile to do it properly.