



DOES YOUR FIRM HAVE A BRAND?

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If you've done any reading lately on law firm marketing, you will undoubtedly have come across the concept of law firm branding. With the influx of marketing professionals into the legal industry, comes the introduction of many concepts which have been long recognized in the corporate world. Branding is seen as a prerequisite step before attempting the creation of a strategic plan. From my point of view, strategic planning should always precede actual marketing activities. And individuals should develop marketing plans which fit into the overall strategy of their practice group or department, with those plans dovetailing into that of the firm as a whole. And it all starts first with the branding process.

What is a law firm brand? Well, first let's identify what it *isn't*. It's not a slogan, nor a marketing strategy used by a segment (practice group or department) of the firm. Rather, it is the uniqueness, or the very essence of the firm, which gives life to its perceived identity. It is something that permeates the entire firm. It is a vision which must be shared by everyone at the firm, from top rainmaker to copy clerk. Some view a brand as nothing more than the old-fashioned concept of a firm's reputation. But while a reputation usually arises externally to the firm, and may or may not reflect qualities which please, flatter or benefit the firm, a brand is visualized and molded purposefully and strategically within the firm and then externalized.

Development of a firm brand is not entirely effortless. It will likely involve a time commitment from the lawyers. Typically, a firm must set up an uninterrupted meeting or retreat, for at least several hours, maybe even a full day, during which time the lawyers must identify the unique "sales qualities" of the firm by examining the firm closely. The list of unique qualities should be narrowed down until it contains a very brief number of points; no more than three to five. Some of these points may be unreal. In other words, they may really be unfulfilled "wishes" of the lawyers. The most important part of the process is that all lawyers agree on the items on the list, whether they are yet real or not. Consensus is critical if the brand is to be successfully marketed, both internally and externally.

Once the brand is developed, it must be successfully marketed internally first. That means that it must become real and credible for all members of the firm. It must be communicated effectively, so that everyone at the firm, up and down the ladder, is on the same page. Some changes may need to be made internally so that the brand becomes real. For example, a firm which wants to recruit and hold onto better quality associates might decide that one of the aspects of their brand is a vision of the firm as a “lifestyle” firm. And once the attorneys all agree, the firm may need to make changes in terms of billable hour requirements, telecommuting possibilities, and so forth to make this brand real. It must be “lived and seen” on a daily basis by all employees of the firm, and permeate the way they go about doing their jobs, and how they view the firm.

Once the brand has been successfully internalized, it is time for the firm to develop its strategic marketing plans firm-wide, by department, and on an individual-by-individual basis, for externalizing the brand. There are dozens of books on marketing strategies and activities available through PBA and ABA to assist in this process, plus an abundance of highly qualified marketing consultants.

The most obvious benefit of the brand development is that it builds recognition and loyalty in the marketplace for those who buy legal services. The brand implies value. People are usually willing to pay more for a brand, because there is implied quality and/or value, and as a result people feel safer purchasing a branded service or product. Of course, that has to be followed up with top notch service and legal product. I’m sure you can think of several companies which you feel lately have been “living off their reputation” and not backing up their brand with real quality or service. So your firm can’t depend on the brand without ensuring you deliver on it day after day.

Another benefit to successful brand development comes in the form of attorney and staff recruitment. People want to work for employers who have good name recognition and a positive image or brand. And those who have particular needs will actively seek out employers who seem to provide a match. For example, attorneys who plan on trying to balance career and family will seek out firms with the “lifestyle” brand.

As times change, your brand may need to change, too. Markets and clients are subject to change over time, and your firm must evolve with those changes. Or you may find yourself marketing unique qualities which no longer have appeal to your clientele. So it is wise to periodically have another uninterrupted meeting to take a look at your firm and see if the vision is still current and true, or whether a course correction is called for. When your vision is complete once again, with all attorneys buying into it, market it internally at the firm, and then recreate your strategic plans to market it to your clients and prospects.



It isn't enough to have your own private vision of your firm. Nor do you want your firm's reputation to haphazardly "create itself" in the marketplace. To enhance your success you must identify and refine the vision of who you are, and market it both internally and externally, so that your clients and prospects share the vision with you, and so that it works for you as you market your services.

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