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Your Brand Is Your Promise

ATTRACTING BUSINESS THROUGH STRATEGIC MARKETING

If you talk marketing with any attorney or practice group head today, you will most certainly hear the word “brand” early in the conversation. It’s unlikely that they learned about branding in law school, although the notion of teaching marketing to law school students is becoming more acceptable. Even more unlikely is the notion of a bar exam question such as “Define the term ‘brand’ and describe how a firm might brand itself.” Thus, while the term is banded about when talking marketing, lawyers and other professionals are usually at a loss for words when asked to define it. While most know a brand when they see one, giving a specific definition is quite challenging.

Branding is currently experiencing a resurgence. Twenty-five years ago, marketers talked about and taught branding. Then, the term left the limelight, replaced for a while by other buzz words and pursuits such as an emerging emphasis on client satisfaction or pursuit of the Malcolm Baldrige award. Then the term came back into the spotlight in a big way a decade ago. It’s not that marketers weren’t branding in the meantime; they were just not referring to it as such.

So, what is a brand and why should a lawyer care about it? And, even more importantly, how can you use branding to grow your business?

A brand is comprised of three distinct aspects, which may be part of the reason why it is difficult to define. The first aspect is the one that professionals usually think of first when asked to define the word – that is, the logo or corporate identity. Although this is a component of a brand, it is really just the graphic identify that transmits a message.

The message it is transmitting is the core component of the brand — the brand’s promise to the client or consumer. Your brand is your promise. When you see the logo, it is communicating that the firm behind it stands for a promise. The promise may be to have specific expertise in a particular industry, to care about clients or similar commitments. Without this promise, the graphic is just a pretty picture.

The third aspect is the brand equity, which refers to the brand’s economic aspect. It represents the difference that people are willing to pay to get a brand compared to an unbranded product. It is the reason why there is a business buying and selling well-known brand names and is literally the bottom line of why we brand. We brand our firms and ourselves to differentiate us from the competition in order to attract clients and new business, and to validate our current clients’ decision to do business with us.

So, where do you start to grow your business through branding? Your first step is to address the core: delineate your promise to your clients. This should be as specific as possible and can be a challenging undertaking. Cross the word “responsive,” and others that you hear over and over, off your list. Think like a lawyer. If you want to say that you offer responsive service, state your case and support it. How are you responsive? Calls returned within how long? On call 24/7? If you offer “proactive” service, what is it and how do you provide it?

The promise must be one on which you can deliver. If you cannot do so consistently, you are punching holes in your brand and damaging your firm’s business. Make only the promises you can keep, and make sure that everyone in your firm knows what these promises are.

In order to establish your promise you need to ask several questions. First, to whom are you marketing today? A fairly obvious and basic question, but the answers change over time. Who is your end user? Who does the “buying” — the end user or referral source? Where are they located? What are their “buyer values,” in other words, on what criteria do they base their decision? Occasionally, price is the driving

factor, but rarely so. That’s one of the reasons you brand — to differentiate your practice enough that it sets you apart from the pack and any price war. Here, industry expertise often plays a decisive role. And of course, there’s always “chemistry” and trust.

Also, answer the following questions: What are the trends in your markets? Are clients looking for success billing? Do they care about whether you are the first on the block with the newest technology? Or, are they looking for a service package?

The more specific the answers you can provide to these questions, the greater the potential for a return on investment. Your answers will not only help you brand yourself, but will focus your marketing to avoid diffusing your efforts. It’s always tempting to spring into action without a firm foundation, but building a solid program on a firm footing and strategy can make your marketing much more powerful.

Before you get too far, you also need to consider how you will measure your results. It’s important to separate your marketing measurement from that of sales. Why? In professional services, marketing brings you the opportunity to be in front of a prospect. Once in front of them, other skills come into play. You can generate a great number of qualified leads, but still not see any increase in revenue if your people fail in the sales process.

At this stage of the game, the key is to think of your measurement in marketing terms. This is challenging, but cannot be ignored. For instance, are you getting more at-bats in front of qualified prospects? Are referral sources and prospects commenting on your marketing? Are you getting more articles placed in industry-specific publications? The point is that your game plan has to incorporate how you will capture and measure results.

Once you have identified your promise and answered the questions above, you can provide effective direction to the department or company that is creating your firm identity. Keep in mind that branding is an investment, just as any other form of marketing. If your image and any vehicle that carries it, such as your business card, do not scream high quality (e.g., by being on a solid paper stock), you are communicating that you don’t think of your firm as a worthwhile investment. Why, then, should anyone else believe it is?

As you create your marketing program, keep in mind that your brand is your promise. You must continuously communicate your promise to your markets, as well as continuously deliver on it.



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