

Lawyer, Know Thyself: Fundamental Tips for Building a Strong Brand and a Strong Practice

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To attract new clients, you must first be able to answer this question: Why *you*? Why should a prospective client choose you over every other lawyer or law firm in town? What makes you better than the competition? To formulate the answer, you have to understand yourself and your competition. You must figure out what makes you different and how to communicate your uniqueness to your target audience.

These concepts probably sound familiar because understanding yourself, your competition, your unique selling proposition and your target market comprise the fundamentals of marketing. And like it or not, marketing is a requisite for building a successful law practice. So get to know yourself—and be sure to take these steps.

Define Your Brand

Your brand identity is comprised of everything the world sees and hears about you and, ultimately, how your firm is perceived by its clients, prospects and the community. You don't have to go far to gain valuable insights into how you already fit into the marketplace. Ask your existing clients and others in your firm to answer these questions:

- What issues are we passionate about? And by extension, what organizations do we support?
- What services do we offer?
- Where are we located?
- What is our pricing?
- What important characteristics differentiate me as a practitioner?
- What important characteristics set us apart as a law firm?

Know Your Competition

To differentiate yourself, you've got to know your competition. Take advantage of tools such as LexisNexis and Factiva subscription services for gaining market intelligence and Google and other search engines for researching competitors' newsletters, white papers, press coverage and directory listings. A close look at competitors' Web sites will show you how they are attempting to differentiate themselves. Analyze your practice's competition by asking the following: 33Who are our top five competitors and how do they get business?

- What are the competitors' strengths and weaknesses?
- What is the top advantage we offer over our competitors?
- Where is the gap in the market that our competitors may be overlooking?
- What is our success rate when we go head-to-head with the competition and why do prospects choose our firm?
- How can we further differentiate our services from the competition?

Communicate Your Uniqueness

Once you have painted a more complete picture of your own practice as well as the competition, you can communicate your uniqueness to your target audience. Remember that communicating your brand can take many forms, including doing, showing, telling and even living it. Here are a few examples:

- Focus in a specialized area. Create a specialty for your firm to be known for and your firm will come to mind first when potential clients have a need for that particular service.
- Find the gaps. Revisit the question, “Where is the gap in the market that my competitors may be overlooking?” If you can find and fill that gap, you can make yourself first and “own” that niche. Being first is a powerful branding tool. Who remembers the second man on the moon or the second person to fly solo across the Atlantic?
- Select clients who will reinforce your brand. This is an extension of focusing your practice. Satisfied clients from your target audience can increase awareness of you in the market. Word of mouth is a very credible form of promotion. Use testimonials from selected clients in your marketing materials, including on your Web site, to reinforce your brand.
- Develop a strong visual identity. Don’t underestimate the impact of a good logo and tagline to convey a message about the uniqueness of your firm. Just as a visual graphic draws the eye and makes an impression, a tagline establishes a “picture thought” that can set you apart. Take the time to develop your logo and tagline and then use them on all forms of communication, including your letterhead, business cards, brochures, newsletters, Web sites and blogs to help you stand out and reinforce your brand.
- Always communicate your brand. Although it is vital that your logo and tagline are on all materials, remember your brand is comprised of all that defines you or your firm. The things you say and even the way you say them are part of your brand. Use presentations, proposals, even phone protocol as opportunities to proactively communicate your brand.
- Maintain high visibility in your marketplace. Make personal appearances, publish, advertise and sponsor events and organizations. Become known as a speaker or writer to establish yourself as an expert in your niche and strengthen your brand. Use strategic advertising to communicate your message directly to your audience. Interact with others who share your passion through pro bono work and involvement in nonprofit organizations. Demonstrating your active concerns is a great way to live your brand. your firm and showcase your unique brand. The opposite of differentiation is commoditization, or competing solely on price because the services offered are virtually the same. Refuse to join the race to the bottom in fees by building a strong brand, both as a firm and as an individual practitioner. Then instead of becoming a commodity, you will be well positioned to win business by convincingly answering the question “What makes you better than the competition?”