

Market the Firm or Market the Attorneys? **Finding a Common Thread**

Inevitably any law firm with at least a handful of attorneys and more than one area of emphasis is faced with a critical business development question - does it market the firm in general or does it promote the successes and qualifications of individual attorneys. To do the former alone offers the tantalizing possibilities that come with *branding*. The latter promises the kind of word-of-mouth “buzz” that brings in clients for very specific reasons.

Not only is the question an important one, but it often is experienced as growing pains. Business development strategies that worked once now seem to be less relevant. For example, a family law practice grows to considerable size, in part, based on an aggressive marketing campaign. In addition to the requisite brochures and web site, this firm runs some advertising in local publications, disseminates press releases in local/regional newspapers and occasionally promotes some kind of special event or seminar. These promotional efforts are aimed at younger and middle-aged adults, who reside within a few miles of the practice itself. Perhaps the firm has also positioned itself strategically – portraying itself as personable and accessible.

But what about the marketing efforts of the larger firm – one that offers, for example, services in the areas of business law, employment law, environmental law, intellectual property law and/or where it serves as representatives or solicitors of municipalities across a wide area? Suddenly everything is different. Different audiences, different geographical boundaries, different message requirements. The corporate litigator may not be so keen on being portrayed as personable and accessible.

Like the smaller firm or one with a single practice area, the larger firm will still promote itself through ads, collateral, its web site, etc. But everything is going out with different messages. The family law guys still want the locals to see them as personable and accessible; the corporate litigators think a huge chunk of the country needs to understand their “clout,” and the folks in the IP group are trying to reach inventors and entrepreneurs everywhere. At this point there is no unified message and no single target market to pursue. In fact, the law firm is really only one law firm because it shares a common name and reports a single balance sheet.

With different agendas comes the risk of personal politics - politics that threaten to wreak havoc on the firm and threaten to stall or even derail its marketing efforts. Sometimes, no one may even be aware that this is happening.

At this point, it becomes imperative to have an understanding as to how the firm's *branding* and the marketing of individual attorneys/practice groups should interact.

Branding needs to serve as an umbrella that covers all areas of expertise. Individual attorneys and practice groups need to be promoted to their respective audiences and geographies with specific messages highlighting accomplishments, expertise etc. This can be done through ads, direct mail, seminars or through public relations opportunities that present themselves. But whatever the marketing "tool," it must be implemented within the context of an overall firm message. The firm's image generates awareness and provides a credibility that make all of the subordinate messages (from specific practice areas) work that much harder. In turn, it is the accumulation/sum of the individual messages that reinforces an overall image. Hence, the question becomes not whether the firm should employ both types of promotional programs – it should – but rather the question becomes what the underlying unifying theme or meaning behind the brand might be.

This is no easy task and one with which marketers in all types of industries must grapple with frequently. It requires a good deal of firm introspection in which those in a leadership position ask themselves to determine what makes their firm unique, worth "hiring," and what is that singular characteristic that serves as a common thread regardless of what area of the law is being promoted, to whom and where. For example, this common thread may be a unique approach to practicing law, it could be the size of the firm, that it is on the cutting edge, that there is an accessibility that is *always* there, that only the most highly qualified attorneys practice here, or that the firm's organizational structure lends itself to providing services superior to those of the competition. Successfully marketing the firm requires understanding that singular theme and applying it to the efforts of every individual or practice group's promotional program. Hence the *branding* serves the individual while the individual should reinforce the brand. To do one and not the other promises only to diminish the results of either.