



Bring your Brand to life

by Liette Monat and Paule Marchand

The importance of branding

Every lawyer, every law firm wants – indeed needs – to stand out from the crowd. A good place to start is with three questions:

- *WHY should your clients resist your competitors' advances?*
- *WHY should interesting prospects change over to your firm?*

The answers to these will help you define your Brand. The third question then becomes:

- *How will you communicate your Brand to your clients and prospective clients?*

Your management team, in providing you with answers to these questions, must demonstrate marketing intelligence, the right attitude and skills.

And then all your partners and your professionals should apply your Brand in everything they do, live by your Brand and embody your Brand.

What is your Brand made of?

The Brand you market and sell is a combination of three elements:

- **Technical expertise:** This accounts for about 50 per cent of your firm's distinctive character; but this alone will not distinguish you or your firm, since, from a client's perspective, most legal firms are competent enough.

- **Relationship quality plus your value-added expertise:** These two elements account for the remaining 50 per cent and work together to make you and your partners stand out.

First, the quality of the relationship you develop with your prospects and clients determines how your clients feel with you, about you and about your firm.

- Do they feel that you respect and understand them?
- Are they stimulated by your ideas?
- Do you make them feel important?
- Do they look forward to your calls and meetings with pleasure? Or do they find you competent – but abrupt, abrasive or condescending?

The second element is the **value of your contribution, your advice and your support**. The eye-openers you provide, the opportunities you spot, the obstacles you help them overcome, intellectual stimulation and business savvy you offer: These are all elements that create added value for each client and address a pivotal question. What does doing business with you give them, as opposed to doing business with your competitor?

Most professional firms manage their technical expertise very well. Unfortunately, very few manage the quality of the relationship they develop with their clients and prospects and the value of their contribution – the added value – for them.

Yet these are the only areas in which a firm can truly distinguish itself. The quality of the relationship and the value of your contribution are where your professionals make the difference. This is where your Brand takes root, takes form, comes to life. Moreover, there is no limit to improvement in these aspects.

Plan to make them say “WOW!”

Define a focused marketing strategy. Decide which clients you want to target and what you want them to say about you, your service and your firm.

For example, you might want to be branded as being:

- the top notch expert for difficult cases; or
- the creative, flexible business advisor who offers suggestions and finds solutions; or
- the hold-your-hand partner who understands your clients' specific issues and supports them in achieving their business objectives.

Your challenge is to get all your professionals to buy into this way of thinking, and to make sure that they have the skills to personify your chosen Brand. Do your people allow you to be who you claim to be? Can your people give more than lip service to your Brand? Can they embody your Brand?

Your clients are also key players on your team. Maintain an ongoing dialogue with them to realign your efforts. Ask them directly what could make the difference for them and grow with them. This will accomplish what surveys cannot – give you in-depth answers to your clients' needs and expectations.

Remember, you cannot be all things to all clients. You must establish your Brand astutely, as your choice will have important consequences in terms of infrastructure, operating costs, orienting your professionals' expertise, allocating budget, and so on. It also sets your business development in a specific direction, an orientation that is difficult to change mid-stream. Clients whose needs or expectations are not met by your Brand will be impervious to your courting. In other words, once you have chosen and begun to develop your Brand, it is costly and cumbersome to try to change it.

Some firms try to offer a full menu of services at the risk of diminishing their clients' confidence in what to expect from them. They even risk de-motivating their professionals through a lack of direction.

Far better to declare your Brand, one that will attract clients you can satisfy fully.

Give life to your Brand at each step of a business relationship

Now it is time to translate your decisions into action.

THE NETWORKING STAGE:

This is where you invest resources (time, money and energy) in:

- getting your market to know about you and what distinguishes you and your firm;
- establishing interesting new contacts; and

- cultivating your existing clients, prospective clients and intermediaries.

Networking is time-consuming and requires big budgets. It needs to be closely managed for you to get the best return on your investments. The challenges here are to:

- invest your resources in the right places, in a coordinated and systematic manner; and
- perform well, at every opportunity, to create the desired strong impression.

For example: At a chamber of commerce lunch you find yourself seated next to a total stranger. To create the impression you want, your primary tool is your conversation – and so it is essential to manage it skillfully.

How? By:

- listening rather than dominating the conversation;
- not constantly turning the subject back to yourself, not trying to steal the show;
- reaching out, inviting the other person to express himself or herself; and
- allowing yourself to be impressed by the other.

In this short business conversation, you have given the other a first taste of what it would be like to work with you, a taste of the quality of the relationship you would develop and of the value of the contribution you would bring.

THE COURTING STAGE:

Courting your contacts, following up after a first contact, helps you develop a meaningful relationship with them after that first contact. It's also an opportunity to earn the potential client's trust so that he or she considers switching to do business with you; and it gives a taste of the benefits he or she will reap from doing business with you.

To score points at the courting opportunity, you have to refrain from talking about yourself too soon and refrain from listing all your technical expertise and achievements.

Since you are not yet investing your energies in delivering service, you should invest in giving advice, in giving the prospect a taste of the relationship, and a taste of what it would feel like to be served by you.

You have to take the initiative and reach out to the prospect. The more you discover about the prospect during your initial conversation, the more possible avenues you will have for your follow-up.

At this stage a team effort is essential to surround the prospect. Don't fall into the trap of warning your professionals against giving free advice. Remember that this kind of advice is what will convert the prospect into a client, and a good part of your marketing budget should be used for exactly this.

SELLING STAGE:

You reach the selling stage only when you have developed the relationship and acquired the understanding necessary to:

- translate your competencies into real benefits for the specific person to whom you are selling;

- deal with his or her questions and objections; and
- sell your fee.

Again, don't rush the sale or list your credentials.

Focus on your prospect, and show your potential client the benefits they will get from being served by you – again, the relationship and the contribution aspects.

Adapt your approach to each and every individual circumstance. It will change according to whether you are selling to an individual contact, making a sales pitch to a decision-making committee, writing a proposal or participating in a "beauty contest" to defend your proposal.

In all cases, talk to them, about them, for them – with interest, caring and determination.

Show your understanding of how the specific mandate fits into their global context and what they would gain from your presence in their affairs.

Create a target team with representatives from all your combined services. This approach not only helps you better understand the prospect's situation and needs, but also allows you to offer the prospect a full range of services.

Your challenge is to bring your client or prospect to the point where he says: "OK, they cost the earth, but they're worth it."

Therefore, avoid going on the defensive or lowering your fees. Sell your fees by giving more, by developing a relationship of quality and bringing contribution of value to your prospect, and eventually, to your client.

SERVICE DELIVERY:

At this stage that you get the opportunity to prove that your Brand is real, and to enchant your client to the extent that the news spreads by word of mouth.

The challenges are to:

- Avoid the trap of becoming totally absorbed in technical work and neglecting the relationship and the contribution aspects.

Your own instincts and your personal marketing intelligence will tell you what will work for different clients, what matters to them, what they will perceive as added value, what will score points with them.

- Deal with challenging situations, such as client dissatisfaction, so positively that it actually enhances your relationship.

Again, don't be defensive, and don't cut your fees. Instead, solicit, welcome and listen to complaints and requests with an open mind.

If a demand is unrealistic, explain why.

Use reasonable suggestions or complaints as an opportunity to work with the client to enhance your service, and, again, enter the relationship and the contribution aspects.

CONSOLIDATING AND DEVELOPING STAGES:

Here's where you have the opportunity to:

- maintain and build a true advisory relationship with the client in between mandates;

- spot new business opportunities; and
- make the client's network work for you.

This is where a good part of your marketing budget should be invested. But it means a lot more than entertaining. It means continuing to provide them with advice, to watch for opportunities for them, to warn them of potential pitfalls – in short, continuing to be their advisor.

When the next mandate comes up, you are not a voice from the past – you are an ongoing, valued presence.

Become more focused and strategic

Bringing your Brand to life does not demand more time and money. But it does require willpower, preparation, systematic coordination and follow-up. And it demands a different attitude and set of priorities.

For example, a Key Client Program is not an artifice – to succeed it needs:

- a fundamental change of attitude on the part of all partners and professionals;
- the development of their interpersonal and relationship abilities;
- the firm's alignment of its philosophy, vision, management and systems in order to encourage and provide support to its professionals as they breathe life into the brand.

Silo management; competition between your resources and practices; an evaluation process and remuneration structure that encourage individual performances instead of collective results: All these elements must be entirely realigned in order to support your branding.

Being overloaded with work or not enjoying marketing activities are no excuse – they are the equivalent of putting one's head in the sand. All of the professionals in your firm must take some responsibility for providing their professional services with an eye to marketing. Waiting until business begins to fall off is waiting until it is too late. Lasting relationships and a stellar reputation take time to develop.

Your people make the difference!

There are no new, improved marketing recipes, no magic formulae that will turn you into the "Leader of the Pack."

You have to determine and manage the impact that you create – the impact that comes from the quality of the relationship that you develop with your clients and the contribution beyond expectations that you provide them. This is what will lead your clients to spread the word. And this can only come when your people bring your Brand to life.

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