

The Morphing of Branding into Strategic Marketing

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When Norm Rubenstein, currently Chief Marketing Officer of Orrick Herrington and Sutcliffe, shared the “Wheel of Fortune” of Law Firm Marketing with its nine components at the 1986 LMA (then NALFMA) Conference, many of us enthusiastically agreed. Just as we have witnessed a tremendous forward momentum in the evolution in law firm marketing since then, so shall we see branding come of age? The definition of branding, as many service marketers currently perceive it, will expand from tag lines or clever slogans to encompass brand-focused integrated strategic marketing plans.

Some senior-level marketing directors are already living that future. Norm Rubenstein, along with his strong marketing team led by Suzanne Donnels, National Director of Marketing, are actually walking the walk. They spent the past ten months developing their new brand and recently rolled it out in December of 2000.

The new brand, which focuses on defining the characteristics that Orrick shares with market leaders in the finance and technology sectors, shows how a brand must be integrated internally within the firm as well as externally in the marketplace.

“In articulating Orrick’s brand promise,” said Rubenstein, “our goal was to imbue our mark—a clean, modern “O”—with new meaning so that every appearance of Orrick’s corporate identity further communicates the brand promise and reinvests the logo with its new associations. Orrick’s brand promise is built on shared substantive and cultural traits with firm clients from both the traditional and new economies. We suggest that these traits are integral components of market leadership, and we call these leading businesses, “O-Businesses.” All of the firm’s communication materials reiterate the O-Business concept, underscoring Orrick’s clear contribution to its clients’ success. Over time we expect that when clients, prospects, recruits, and other friends of the firm see Orrick materials or hear the firm name, they will recall the O-Business concept and link it mentally to the substantive and service-delivery strengths that differentiate Orrick from other law firms and define its value proposition. Our excitement, in part, results from rare synergy of brand analysis and corporate identity development that yields integrated marketing tools and messages through which brand concept reverberates.”

Let’s look at a company that has evolved its brand communication over the time from, “The computer for the rest of us.” to “Think Different.” to its current iteration of “Different.” It’s Apple Computer, of course. Although the positioning lines have changed, its brand-position remains the same. The positioning lines in this example are statements of fact about their brand’s unique selling points and claim of distinction. In other words, positioning statements that reflect a brand are something that describe the true essence of the company or brand.

This same principle applies in branding service businesses like law firms. If you know three solid, bulletproof unique selling points (USPs), ones that no other law firm can claim, then communicate that differentiation in the form of a positioning line, and make it as clever and catchy as you can. If you can’t really define at least three USPs, you need to go through some sort of discovery process that will uncover them. Start by listing as many facts as you can about your firm (a hundred or so) then distill those facts down to three to five USPs. We call this process “Turning the Telescope™.” This means we turn the telescope on the firm and really search for what is unique about it, like its culture, people, products, history, you name it. Once you’ve accomplished your discovery, find ways to make them absolutely unique. Develop a clever positioning line.

In developing the unique brand of lawyering for ShawnCoulson, a new international law firm, we began by studying their USPs from our branding session. They are:

1. Preferred solution: Global reach. Service locally.
2. Shared Values: Partners that practice. Technology that matters.
3. Broader Coverage.

The positioning statement, World Wise., makes multiple promises to clients and prospects. First, ShawnCoulson has extensive global experience; second local expertise benefits clients and client service preferences are shared among its various offices through technology; and third, this is a perfect solution for clients with multi-national matters who want customized service. In short, it suggests that ShawnCoulson is a firm with international experience that has a

keen sense of the local courts and laws. The brand was shared internally through the phrase, “ShawnCoulson—Practice Wisdom.”

A positioning line is also a promise. But the most important thing about a positioning statement is that it is also a guideline for internalizing the brand within the firm as well as externalizing it to your marketplace. This is exactly where the future of law firm branding lies. It is taking your firm’s brand essence and using it as an umbrella in all facets of your strategic marketing plan. This would include training, internal communications, your firm’s web site, firm sponsored events, direct mail pieces, proposal responses, printed collateral materials, client feedback programs, advertising, and the like.

Law firms are also beginning to understand the significant difference between a brand and brand development. Branding is a tactic. And brand development is a discovery process that unearths brand distinction. Remember, the definition of a brand is, “A claim of distinction.” Branding tactics include the consistent use of color, graphics, and positioning lines used in communication of a brand’s distinction. But, the color, graphics and tag line are not the distinction itself. No, a brand’s distinction is whatever separates it from its competitors, makes it stand out as extraordinary, or better yet, more valuable to the client—the end user. So you can see the importance of a discovery process in order to find it.

The number of law firms advertising continues to rise. Many of the firms utilize consistent color, graphics, tag lines and firm logos. These are simply branding tactics and the ads alone don’t provide the ultimate reason for purchasing legal services, rather it’s the brand’s valuable distinction that instills confidence in the client’s purchasing decision. Advertising becomes a tactic in externalizing a firm’s brand.

Jeffrey Morgan, Group Associate Publisher of American Lawyer Media, and a current member of the LMA Board of Directors, has witnessed the incredible growth in the use of creative display advertising as a part of a law firm’s comprehensive marketing plan and branding strategy.

Jeffrey states, “Brands, in their truest sense, take on special meaning to a buyer. A successful law firm brand rewards a client with a certain amount of comfort in their purchasing decision. The key to successful branding is that the target audience perceives a distinction between your firm’s brand compared to other firms. This differentiation cannot be accomplished with advertising alone. The equity of your firm’s brand is determined by knowledge created in the buyer’s mind through ALL of your marketing programs. Once your firm’s brand has been determined, each of your communications vehicles should be evaluated in terms of their ability to deliver and support the brand. Advertising, while a highly effective tool to articulate a firm’s brand, is most effective when it is well managed by marketing professionals that coordinate it with other marketing strategies.”

Many law firms are becoming educated on the differences between a catchy slogan not based on the true unique essence of the firm versus a branded positioning statement. A true brand executed as part of an integrated marketing plan separates a law firm from the competition—in a memorable way. Branding is a serious proclamation of a firm’s brand values to its clients.