



Topic: How does branding fit within your strategic plan?

Leading the debate:

- o Rolland Keane, Marketing Director, **Charles Russell**
- o Geoff Dodds, Consultant, **Geoff Dodds Consulting**

Round the table:

- o Elizabeth Corcoran, Senior Marketing Manager, East of England, **Eversheds**
- o Stephen Goddard, Commercial Development Director, **Kester Cunningham John**
- o Karen Hanson, Marketing Communications Manager, **Mills & Reeve**
- o Tim Hill, Business Development Manager, **Taylor Vinters**
- o Diana Johnson, Business Development Manager, **Prettys Solicitors**
- o Cara Mclean, Head of Marketing, **N W Brown and Co.**
- o Janet Rudge, Marketing Manager, **Birketts Solicitors**
- o Jonathan Younger, Marketing Director, **Hewitsons Solicitors**

Organisers:

- o Maggie Taylor, Principal, Prima PR & Marketing
- o Brigid MacDermott, Partner, The Progressive Business Group

Scene setting:

- We have an opportunity to develop the Oracle Forum into a network where we share best practice and knowledge – a chance to learn from one another to increase value for all.

Rolland Keane, Marketing Director, Charles Russell - the law firm's perspective:

- Brand is about perception - it is extremely powerful and undeniably adds value to the bottom line. But are professional service firms truly able to brand themselves in a meaningful way?
- Considering brand from a consumer perspective as a comparison i.e. the influence of the 'big 4' (Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury's and Morrisons) and hugely successful brands such as Coca Cola, Virgin and IBM. People attach values to these brands which has a bearing on their success. Is it possible for people to attach values in the same way to a professional services firm?
- In professional firms it would be difficult to fire the rain makers because they don't live the brand and truly reflect the core values!
- The process in consumer marketing is different. More interpersonal relationships are built in the service sector so the effect of the brand is different.

- How much is a customer truly influenced by the professional service firm's brand? Does third party validation have a greater influence?
- Undeniably a good brand adds real value and can be very powerful but have the emperor's new clothes been sold in to the professions?
- If branding for the professional services sector worked in the same way as the consumer market then all firms around the table would understand each other's values which is not necessarily the case...
- One could argue that professional firms cannot be branded in the traditional sense; however there are elements of successful branding that firms can adopt e.g. consistency of key messages and tone.

Geoff Dodds, Consultant (Brand, marketing, business development) - the brand consultant's perspective:

- What do we really mean by 'Living the brand'?
- Considering the logo as part of the branding process. In a professional services firm, is the logo really meaningful? Does brand even have a role?
- Is branding about consistency of experience for the customer, and about choice - making the selection of a firm easier for the customer?
- A firm's brand must have credibility and customers must have a true understanding and buy in to the brand values.
- Perhaps a brand is the impression that is left behind once the messages have been given i.e. what is said behind closed doors...
- Important to go back to basics when considering a re-brand. The timing has to be right so that the true issues are addressed at the right time ensuring that the change is managed effectively.
- Branding is about alignment i.e. has the organisation got values, a mission, a direction, and is everyone in the firm aware of those brand values?
- Alignment is perhaps tougher in smaller regional firms
- The highest level is the creation of 'brand stardom' – strong brands that are built on the strongest brand strategies.
- Firms need to differentiate themselves and build trust – particularly crucial for firms in the professional services sector.
- First stage is defining a firm's brand i.e. what they stand for. This then needs to be protected and then those defining features accentuated.
- Customer motivations for purchasing are emotive so getting across the defining features of a brand are key, but it is a challenge.

- A firm's brand stands for everything about that firm. Communication of the brand is key but it ultimately comes down to behaviour, people and leadership.
- Firms must be strict and recruit, train and manage performance in the mould of their brand.
- Example of PWC Consulting given – the 4 brand values were 'visionary, bold, open and accountable' – once agreed, these were pushed hard throughout all company processes and ultimately a very strong brand presence was created.
- The key to creating a successful brand is constant engagement – talking to people about what the brand means and gauging and measuring their perception.
- Brand should be an infection rather than a religion – creation of enthusiasm about the firm's brand, both internally and externally.
- Strong leadership is at the heart of a successful brand – if in place, firms can ride on that.
- It is key to be bold, direct and manage patience – the branding process can be frustrating!

Roundtable debate:

Discussion point 1: Why and when to rebrand? - what is the reason, is there a clear strategy, how do you create an effective brand identity and values v simple name / logo change? **How can you differentiate yourself?**

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- Two key words sum up what needs to be in place for a successful branding process – *behaviour* and *courage*.
 - Successful brand strategy must be about differentiation and this comes back to strong leadership – focussing on the 'what' versus the 'how' but this is very tough.
 - Need to identify the firm's core values i.e. shouldn't be about hanging the brand on a new shiny building – often a firm's brand is based on an image rather than a strong and considered strategy.
 - A strong brand can be a clear growth strategy – helping to attract the right graduates. It can also act as a flag, uniting the existing staff.
 - *Simply Better: Winning and Keeping Customers by Delivering What Matters Most* by Patrick Barwise and Sean Meehan. The authors argue that it is a better strategy for firms to concentrate more on high level delivery of their services rather than focussing on differentiation – going back to basics before adding the bells and whistles.

- Branding goes beyond vision and values.
- Research should be the starting point and from there the firm can set a clear brand strategy.
- From the perspective of the accountants - interesting to learn that issues around brand consistency amongst partners is entrenched in the legal sector.
- Brand is about re-discovery – being honest and looking inwards at the firm to assess its true defining features.

Discussion point 2: *Internal communications* - How do you get buy in, how can you build an appreciation of what your branding really means and get everyone to “live” the brand and reflect core values?

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- Brand values must drill down to the fee-earners but there is difficulty because it’s about individuals with different approaches so how do you ensure a truly consistent message?
 - People from a firm don’t necessarily have to be clones – there are ways that consistency can be achieved. E.g. in one firm all staff were recruited on the basis of having real industry experience so their individuality was not constrained yet they retained the firm’s core values.
 - Consistency of message is the real challenge – often the message from the marketing department, the fee-earners and elsewhere is different.
 - There is scope for individualism in the firm but there has to be an element of cohesion and consistency of values.
 - Individual fee earners should have general knowledge across all areas of the business so that cross selling is possible - if asked they should be in a position to refer the client to relevant colleagues.
 - If brand is the whole firm and clients ‘buy-in’ to the firm brand why then do they follow fee earners when they move on to pastures new – therefore how important really is the brand v the actual fee earner?
 - There needs to be both – a strong brand and personal relationships
 - In building a successful brand much will depend on the structure of the firm i.e. often decision makers centrally control from one location in a national firm which can hinder the process of change.
 - Leadership has a key part to play in building a successful brand.
 - The nature of individuals has a bearing – clients want spot-on commercial advice and in some cases perhaps the traits of individuals are actually what defines the firm and creates a strong brand identity. These qualities can then be trained in new recruits ensuring the ethos lives within the firm rather than individuals.

Discussion point 3: External communications – can your brand create an emotional connection with your clients? How do you reinforce the differentiation and how is the brand being perceived?

- Name recognition is a big challenge – staff represent a particular service that the firm offers so it can be very difficult to offer a uniform message.
- In large corporates such as Tesco, staff wear uniforms so there is a very consistent and recognisable feel about it. More of a challenge in a firm as this would not be feasible.
- It is possible to reflect a firm's brand in its building – but it has to be about the ordering i.e. the brand strategy should be clearly in place first and this then reflected in a firm's choice of building.
- The brand relationship must be institutional not individual i.e. not just between the fee-earner and the client – it is the firm's client, not the individual fee earners.
- However research reveals that it is the individual that truly helps to set the firm apart. Customers are often very loyal to fee-earners and would go with them if they were to leave a firm.
- The personal relationship is very important but the challenge is that some fee-earners take the attitude that they can do it best themselves, almost taking on the attitude of sole practitioners.
- People buy people and when new geographic locations are introduced this can present problems for the firm in attracting business to those locations if the trusted fee-earners aren't based there.
- Research needs to be carried out amongst clients to assess this situation.
- One example given was the building of a networked law approach - specialist expertise in different geographic locations. Research will be undertaken to see whether the London based customers would object to their work being carried out elsewhere. Results revealed that 60% didn't mind – providing that there was the guarantee of the same level of quality and responsiveness. From the firm's point of view it is a very profitable exercise as there are less operational costs. The London staff aren't too resistant as they see that the high level strategy work will still come from the London office. However the satellite offices are struggling with the premise more.
- The building is seen as an outward reflection of the brand – a physical representation of the size of the firm.
- In one example the size of a firm's building was almost a misrepresentation of their true size in comparison to another local firm with a smaller building but actually a larger turnover.
- Some firms choose a particular space because it reflects their aspirations of what they would like to become.

- In one example given, a survey carried out by the firm revealed that their Edwardian building did not fit the impression of their progressive brand.
- Contrast can be a good thing though. Example of Lloyds of London given. Their brand comprised both heritage and innovation and this was reflected in their iconic building but with the retention of antique artefacts.
- The building should represent the brand as a whole. In one example a new leader came in and changed the reception area without consulting the staff. It didn't fit the culture of the firm and created problems.
- The building must accommodate the brand rather than a move to a new building precipitating a need for a re-brand.
- A firm's brand comes in when new relationships are formed and in new business development where new perceptions and impressions are being formed.

Summing up:

- For professional firms the challenge is on to build and maintain a meaningful brand - ultimately that comes down to behaviour, people and leadership.
- The brand identity in a professional firm is very different to the consumer marketplace where customers buy emotively based on strong brand values they have attached to that brand.
- In professional firms a brand is built around the client experience achieved through personal relationships.
- Brand is not tangible, it is the impression a firm leaves behind.
- For a firm to truly 'live their brand' it comes down to strong leadership and courage.
- A firm's brand should be based on strong and considered strategy reflecting and protecting the true defining features of the firm.
- So much is taken for granted, mistakes are still made and process can be extremely frustrating when it comes to building a successful brand in a professional firm – and therein lies the challenge...!