

How to stand out from the crowd

Chris Hinze explains that for law firms striving to hone a distinctive image, trust, reliability and value for money are vital attributes, as is a willingness to act on feedback from the way they handle clients

Many law firms – large and small – want to be seen as distinctive, yet few really are unless it is for particular areas of legal expertise and within a particular segment of the market. Yet being seen as distinctive is often viewed as a major achievement for a firm, helping it win clients and retain high calibre people.

Creating a distinctive presence in the market is an area that is difficult to get right because it is dependent on many different factors. Look at other sectors where there are businesses that can be recognised as being distinctive and ask yourself what values you attribute to them. Try Mercedes, Virgin, the AA and Waitrose.

Associated with most if not all of these businesses are values such as trust, reliability, value for money and quality. Not a bad starting point to begin with for lawyers.

However, research carried out by MORI in 2004 as part of the Clementi review revealed lawyers as falling well below doctors, nurses, dentists, policemen and teachers when it came to public satisfaction with their work. Respondents to the survey said that they were more satisfied with their supermarket than with their lawyers. Some comfort might be taken from the fact that lawyers rated above the respondents' bank or building society.

In addition, when asked how they found their lawyers, the public said that they overwhelmingly relied on personal recommendation or previous usage to select whom to use. That does not create much of a feeling of choice in the market. No wonder the Co-op and others think that they have ability to revolutionise the profession given half a chance.

Creating a distinctive feel for a firm covers many different areas – most of them have absolutely nothing to do with the law or with marketing. It covers the legal and communication skills of the firm's people, its use of technology to make communication easier not more complicated, the quality and commerciality of the legal

advice, the frequency and relevance of contact throughout the project, the accuracy of the billing, and the perception of whether the firm delivers value for money. It covers whether the firm is pro-active and brings relevant or interesting ideas to the client or just sits back, waiting for instructions. Not a brochure in sight.

A distinctive feel for the firm is also influenced by how it visually presents itself through its working environment and the way it presents its services and its advice to its clients – in writing, over the telephone, in a meeting, through e-mail and the Internet.

Firms often say that they want to be distinctive – and the first thing they do is change the logo and print a new brochure in a new colour. This is not just foolish, it totally ignores the people and their patterns of behaviour and the systems that make up the life of the firm itself.

If you want to be distinctive then change needs to be from top to bottom and it must originate from within the firm – how it perceives itself and what its clients feel about it – rather than be stamped on it by outside design agencies or the marketing committee.

So the starting point on the road to being distinctive is with how you are perceived today. Look at the firm through the eyes of its clients and its lawyers and support staff. Gather their views on what the firm does really well and, equally, what it does that is either irritating or downright useless. Get their views on what their expectations are when they are working with the firm and what they think it stands for – if anything at all.

If you are a high street or similar practice that deals more with personal clients than corporate instructions then employ some people to become "mystery shoppers" – to come into the firm as pretend clients with problems and see how they are managed. Such information is invaluable. Too often firms are focused on how they see themselves rather than how they are seen by the people who pay the bills or, perhaps, might want to join them.

Once you have the data you are



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in an informed position to start making choices about the firm and create a blueprint for how it needs to either improve or completely change different aspects of the way it works. To quote the 1944 Johnny Mercer song, 'You've got to accentuate the positive; Eliminate the negative; Latch on to the affirmative.'

This process can involve undergoing significant investment in the practice and its people in terms of physical infrastructure (such as office space, IT and telecommunications); intangible infrastructure (such as training and development programmes, appraisal and reward systems, quality control systems, and client relationship management software); and leadership. Putting people into a fresh working environment can help drive change – which is why an office move can really help reshape how people and clients perceive the success and ambitions of a practice.

When it comes to talking about changes, unrealistic statements and hyperbole simply do not wash – they need to be credible. That does not mean boring or lacking in ambition, just make sure the message matches the content.

Almost inevitably the best periods of time to bring about the necessary changes are either when a firm is just starting up, when it is merging or when it is looking over the edge and not liking what it sees.

There is one other occasion – when the market itself changes. The government's planned liberalisation in 2008 creates a one-off opportunity for firms to change the way they work and present themselves to the wider world.

Greater access to external capital will give them the ability to invest, and the potential entry of major brands into the high street provides the necessary fillip for those firms in that part of the market.

Standing out from the crowd no longer becomes a nice to have; it becomes essential for survival.

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