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Creating a Client Centric Brand[®]

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CREATING A CLIENT CENTRIC BRAND®

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“A brand is the set of expectations, memories, stories and relationships that, taken together, account for a consumer’s decision to choose one product or service over another.”

—Seth Godin

Professional legal marketers are by and large responsible for the creative and labor-intensive effort involved in developing a strong law firm brand. After all, a brand does not develop by chance but rather is strategically planned, crafted and communicated. As the firm and contextual environment evolves, the marketing team (which may consist of one person) must begin the arduous (and often underappreciated) process of refreshing the brand.

Shaping an Attorney’s Unique Brand

However, the *firm’s* brand represents only one component of the business development matrix and individual lawyers bear a measure of responsibility with respect to establishing and promoting their own personal professional brands. In John Hellerman's excellent article “To Build the Brand, Build Up the Lawyers” featured in July’s issue of *Marketing the Law Firm*, he

pointed out that the brands of individual lawyers must be developed because clients hire attorneys and not law firms.

Personal professional branding cannot be reduced to a blueprint. A lawyer's unique brand is developed as clients and referral sources experience the value offered by the attorney. The key is for each individual attorney to take control of his or her own brand and shape it *authentically*. The marketplace will define an attorney's individual brand, in large part, on the basis of the breadth and quality of the lawyer's actions. For example, a lawyer who routinely publishes and speaks in his field of practice will be branded as an expert.

While many facets of a professional brand could be explored, space limitations require me to confine the scope of this article to offering a few narrow perspectives with respect to the branding process in one particular arena—client relationship mastery. Significant economic efficiencies can be achieved if focus is geared toward building a Client Centric Brand®. Most are aware that it is less expensive to obtain repeat business or a referral from an existing client than to go through the arduous cycle of developing a new relationship.

A Brand is a Promise

Many believe that a brand is simply a promise—a promise to prospective and current clients as well as colleagues as to how the lawyer can be expected to behave. Those expectations are based on past actions observed by or conveyed to those we seek to favorably impress.

Example: Wealthy Client of partner in the estates and trusts department confides that she suspects her husband of cheating and wants to revisit portions of her will. Partner gently suggests that she may wish to consult with one of his partners in the firm's family law department. She politely declines and reveals that her best friend used one of the firm's attorneys for her divorce. The lawyer did not return calls promptly, was always late for meetings and was exceedingly brusque and unsympathetic. Although her friend's legal result admittedly exceeded expectation, Wealthy Client states: "Divorce is difficult enough. I want my attorney to know how to treat me as a person. There are many lawyers out there who are smart, aggressive and yet compassionate. That's what I need—especially now."

While individual attorneys bask in the sunshine of a robust law firm brand, an attorney with a poor personal brand not only undermines the law firm's brand but also affects the law firm's bottom line, as illustrated above. An attorney with a substandard brand will have difficulty getting referrals from outside sources as well as from his or her own partners. Therein lies one of the dangers in failing to train and coach lawyers to develop behavior consistent with a Client Centric Brand®.

The Client Relationship

In the following section, the client relationship is broken down into six stages. Each stage affords a new opportunity to display a unique promise, to galvanize the individual professional brand and to catapult the attorney into a category of one. Certainly, the law firm brand can also be enhanced throughout the relationship; however, that topic is beyond the focus of this particular article. Not all stages will be relevant to each relationship; therefore, the attorney should simply focus on the ones that do apply.

Six Stages of a Client Centric Brand®

Stage One: Prospective Client (Not-Yet Connected)

Objective: To become known as a thought leader in a particular field of law in order to have the opportunity to serve more clients as well as to reinforce relationships with current clients and referral sources.

Action: The lawyer frequently writes articles, blogs or books and speaks before a variety of audiences in the area of law in which he or she wishes to be considered an expert.

Implicit Promise: "I promise that I am a thought leader. I keep on top of the latest developments and cutting edge strategies in the legal arena. Even my colleagues rely on me in order to stay current."

Stage Two: Forging a Connection

Objective: To influence a prospective client to retain the lawyer when the need arises.

Action: The lawyer becomes familiar with the prospect (both at an institutional and individual level) without “pushing” for business. This involves extensive research about the prospect as well as the industry. Connections are made and reinforced again and again.

Implicit Promise: I take the time to get to know prospective clients and their industry thoroughly so that I can offer exemplary representation. I’m willing to be patient and show value first.

Stage Three: Serving the Client

Objective: To offer the best possible client service because it is the right thing to do. Of course, great service also inspires client loyalty.

Action: The lawyer consistently under promises and over delivers. Processes are put into place to ensure that prompt attention is given to phone calls and emails. Documents and correspondence are devoid of sloppy errors. The lawyer is always on time and gives the client full attention during meetings and proceedings.

Implicit Promise: I respect you and the value of your time and always deliver top notch professional service. You have my complete and undivided focus when I work on your matter.

Stage Four: Billing

Objective: To establish that fees are simply part of the business relationship and to ensure that they are paid in full on time.

Action: The lawyer sends out accurate, regular and detailed invoices that reflect the terms of the retainer agreement.

Implicit Promise: I am fair in all of my business dealings with you. The amount of an invoice will never be a surprise.

Stage Five: Conclusion of Matter

Objective: To ensure that the client understands that the matter is complete and to solicit feedback regarding the representation.

Action: A closing letter is sent and the client is surveyed. The survey can be conducted in writing, by phone or personal interview.

Implicit Promise: I care about client satisfaction, will respond to all feedback and continuously strive to improve.

Stage Six: Post Matter

Objective: To continue the relationship with the hope of attracting additional business.

Action: The lawyer has a structured process that keeps his or her name at the top of the client's mind. This could include taking advantage of client entertainment opportunities, forwarding articles of interest or reaching out through email or social media.

Implicit Promise: I am your trusted advisor and am always thinking of your interests—even when I am not actively representing you.

Professional brands can be enhanced with small shifts in attitude and action. If each of “your” attorneys committed to work toward improvement in each of the areas outlined above, how would that affect your law firm's OVERALL brand as well as bottom line?

[Cynthia Sharp](#)

Business development leader and veteran attorney Cynthia Sharp, Esq., works with motivated lawyers seeking to generate additional revenue for their law firms. The business development strategies and skill sets that she shares were developed and tested over a period of 30 years in practice and are constantly refined to reflect modern marketing techniques. For additional information about business development issues, check out thesharperlady.com.