

PLAYBOOK

WHAT CLIENTS ARE SAYING ABOUT YOU BEHIND YOUR BACK

How Firms Can Harness the Power
of Branding



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The last time you shopped for a car, you probably weren't looking for just any vehicle. You were looking for a certain make or model. It was most likely a similar story at the grocery store (where you wanted a specific brand of cereal), department store (where you sought out a particular clothing designer) and even the coffee shop (where you know a certain type of drink just isn't as good anywhere else).

These examples illustrate the strength of brand—a message to consumers about what they can expect in purchasing a product or service. Brands can be incredibly powerful and are indispensable in many industries. However, in the legal realm, they are often underutilized. That's especially true among small law firms and solo practitioners.

One reason for the under-emphasis on brand in law may be that attorneys are good at many things, but often not at creating a strong brand. After all, most law schools don't offer any type of "Marketing 101" course. However, law firms that don't take the time to develop their unique brand are at a disadvantage. In a crowded marketplace, legal consumers leverage a wealth of options and won't think twice about taking their legal needs elsewhere.

As the [2019 Report on the State of the Legal Market](#) noted, "Since 2008, there has been a complete shift from a seller's market to a buyer's market for legal services." Legal consumers are technology-savvy and strapped for time, so they aren't going to make much effort to research who you are, what you do and how do you do it. Your brand needs to convey those facts to your ideal legal consumer clearly, quickly and precisely.

In this playbook, we will explore what makes up a firm's brand (and what doesn't) before proposing four sample brands. Then we outline steps to consider as you devise your own.



What is a brand?

Broadly speaking, a brand is a form of shorthand. It tells consumers what they can expect if they purchase a product or service from a certain source. Or, as Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos bluntly puts it,

“Your brand is what other people say about you when you’re not in the room.”

The best brands are strong, specific and built with a particular audience in mind. For example, Daimler AG has invested significant resources in designing the Mercedes-Benz brand in a way that communicates luxury and sophistication to older and wealthier consumers, while Ford has gone after younger, trendier and more cost-conscious consumers with their 2018 relaunch of the Focus model.

Michael Wallevand, digital marketing expert at FindLaw, speaks regularly to legal professionals about harnessing their law firm brand. “Far too often, brand fundamentals can be tough for some attorneys to swallow, because spending money and time on something as ‘squishy’ as brand building doesn’t always deliver an immediate and obvious return on investment,” said Wallevand. “However, when you see the big picture, you understand that there’s more to the business than measuring clicks and calls. And that’s where taking time on branding can differentiate certain law firms.”

If we're thinking in broad strokes, a law firm's brand isn't so different from any other business. In general, a brand can be thought of as:

01 **Who you are:**

Brand identity is not just your credentials, but also what makes you unique. Consumers like to know who they are doing business with. Yes, your law school's reputation is important, but so are the qualities that make you you. Are you a parent? A community volunteer? An avid amateur athlete? Not every aspect of your personality is appropriate for your professional brand, but sprinkling in relatability here and there can add depth and color to the way you're perceived by potential clients.

02 **What you do:**

Of course you practice law, but what kind and for whom? A personal injury lawyer who helps clients after catastrophic accidents manages very different day-to-day tasks than a personal injury lawyer who handles smaller-scale car accidents and dog bites. Your perspective, approach and even why you decided to practice law in the first place are all important threads that are good to weave into your brand.

03 **How you do it:**

Many law firms and solo attorneys don't share operations information with clients, but that's a mistake. Legal consumers are increasingly putting pressure on their lawyers to offer flexible pricing tools, use electronic communication more extensively and act strategically to avoid future legal difficulties. Your brand could (and should) highlight these attributes.

An overlooked aspect of a law firm's brand is its effectiveness as a business development tool. A brand that's intentionally designed, carefully tailored and thoughtfully delivered will win over prospective clients and make them say, "That's the lawyer for me." That's a significant competitive advantage in an environment where 71 percent of law firms that responded to the [2017 State of U.S. Small Law Firms Survey](#) admitted they are not doing enough to acquire new business. A small law firm or solo attorney with an effective brand will undoubtedly have a leg up on the competition.

What isn't a brand?

What a brand *is* is important, but so is what a brand *is not*. Defining “brand” in the negative can help sharpen your focus and place more emphasis on what really matters. Here are some things a brand is not when it comes specifically to law firms:

01 **Your advertising in isolation:**

Many attorneys think a brand is the same thing as advertising. In actuality, the advertising your law firm pays for is an expression of your brand. In other words, advertising is a vehicle. Your brand is how you use that vehicle to convey the advertising to your intended audience.

02 **What you think of yourself:**

You know that you were featured in a law journal, won a big case five years ago and devote a certain amount of your practice to pro bono. Prospective clients don't (and in some cases may not particularly care). Your self-image lacks the outward-facing element of a brand, and that's critical to a brand's success.

03 **A box to check:**

There's no such thing as building a brand, dusting off your hands and saying, “There, it's finished.” Brands have to be maintained, calibrated and occasionally updated. The upkeep shouldn't be onerous, but minor tweaks need to be applied consistently and diligently.

04 **Here today, gone tomorrow:**

Brands aren't static, but they also aren't replaceable. Changing your brand is possible, but it takes effort, time and money. Bear in mind you can't entirely control people's perception of you. Just because you re-brand your firm, doesn't mean your new brand has crystalized with your target audience. Constructing your brand should be undertaken with thought and circumspection.

Law Firm Brands in Action

Now that we've highlighted what a brand is, what a brand is not and why those distinctions matter, here are four sample law firm brands. Remember, a solid brand isn't an out-of-the-box concept. These are provided for illustrative purposes only, to help you think about the elements that might work for your firm and those that definitely will not.





The Thoughtful Confidante – a family law firm

In the Thomson Reuters Consumer Client Experience Survey, participants ranked firm reputation and recommendations from others as top considerations when selecting an attorney. In that same survey, respondents said they were most dissatisfied with the frequency of communications and responsiveness from their attorney. This is true of all law firms, but it's especially interesting to think about these findings in the context of family law. There are family law clients who do want vigorous representation during a hotly contested divorce. There are many other clients, though, who want to bring the painful experience of ending a marriage or hammering out a child custody agreement to a close swiftly and with dignity. For those clients, branding yourself as experienced, understanding and sympathetic may work well. Furthermore, it may distinguish you from the attorneys with the aforementioned more aggressive approach.



Steps to Success

Most law firms that handle family law matters rely on volume (the Thomson Reuters Consumer Client Experience Survey found that the typical small-law firm family law client spends about \$2,000 and pays that fee by check in one or two installments). In this scenario, a robust [social media](#) presence would be a significant asset. By using LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook to consistently and frequently demonstrate your approach to family law, you can cast a wide net, promoting your brand to thousands of potential consumers. In other words, you meet the criteria that legal consumers stated they want in the Consumer Client Experience Survey.

The Lightning Bolt – a DWI law firm

If there's one practice area where speed counts, it's in the area of DWI defense. In this case, customers are frightened and need help immediately. Thanks to smartphones, they can survey their available options and make a decision on the attorney to hire remarkably quickly. The more a DWI attorney can broadcast that they are available at a moment's notice, the more they will appeal to people who need help and need it now. That's critical – [2017 legal research performed on legal consumers](#) showed that 64 percent of survey respondents expected a response within 24 hours, and 58 percent contacted only one attorney (and presumably hired the first attorney they contacted.) While that research didn't pertain solely to DWI clients, think about what it says. It included consumers with less time-sensitive needs, so the urgency displayed by DWI clients must have been quite pronounced to reach those numbers.



Steps to Success

Just as with The Thoughtful Confidante, a social media presence benefits The Lightning Bolt by providing exposure. Other tools that may be especially helpful: a [mobile-responsive website](#) with a [click-to-call feature](#) and a [web chat service](#). The second feature, in particular, can help an attorney respond faster to clients even in an environment where it isn't possible to be on call 24 hours a day.





The Old Hand – a personal injury firm

When someone is injured, he or she is often bewildered by the flurry of insurance paperwork, healthcare decisions and general life disruptions that follow. This is why many personal injury clients want their attorney to project an air of confidence and capability. In the Thomson Reuters Consumer Client Experience Survey, 87 percent of respondents said they felt their lawyer should show “a genuine interest in [their] well-being.” To apply that to personal injury law specifically, this may mean they want an attorney who not only provides assurances that the legal aspects of their case are handled, but also shows an interest in helping clients move on with their lives.



Steps to Success

Nothing you say about yourself can quite match the power of a referral or client testimonial. These days, [online reviews](#) are how many people evaluate what good or service to purchase. Some lawyers feel intimidated by online reviews because they aren’t easy to control. While it’s true that online reviews aren’t something you can craft to your liking, tools exist that can help you cultivate the sort of reviews you want. Furthermore, online reviews are going to happen whether an attorney likes it or not. It’s better, therefore, to embrace and harness reviews to a firm’s benefit.

The Trusted Advisor – a business law firm

If your clients are small businesses, they want to see you not only as a vendor, but as a trusted business advisor. In other words, they want to know that you understand their business concerns and can help their business grow. Many attorneys make the mistake of thinking clients want to hear fanciful legalese and receive dense, complicated communication. This couldn't be further from the truth. According to the Thomson Reuters Consumer Client Experience Survey, 89 percent of legal consumers said they valued a lawyer's ability to speak to them in plain English. Therefore, what small business clients seem to value, is someone who understands what it's like to run a company and can talk about it in a straightforward and easy-to-understand manner.



Steps to Success

Establishing yourself as a knowledgeable, but plainspoken, counselor is a lengthy process. It can't be accomplished with one op-ed piece in the local bar journal. Instead, it takes sustained, strategic communication. A [blog](#), for example, would be an excellent way to periodically share insights on a number of topics, resulting in a body of writing that shows, as opposed to tells, how and why you're the right partner.



Building Your Own Brand

Now that we've looked at four sample law firm brands, you should have a better idea of the components you want to use to construct your own brand. While it's not necessary to take every one into account, you should have a good reason for omitting a particular element.

Practice Area:

For lawyers, this may be the biggest component to take into account when crafting a brand. Certain practice areas naturally lend themselves to ways of being perceived. An estate planning attorney most likely wants to be thought of as knowledgeable and detail-oriented, for example. However, that doesn't mean there isn't latitude and room for creativity (within reason, of course.)

Desired clientele:

Turning to estate planning attorneys again, some choose to focus on young parents who are thinking of how to provide for their children should the worst happen. Others strive to appeal to older people with stronger asset portfolios. Building a brand isn't necessarily an "either/or" game, but a

law firm that tries to appeal to both sets of clients simultaneously risks looking like a jack-of-all trades. Typically, that's a turn-off for many legal consumers.

Geography:

Chicago is different from Cheyenne, so your brand and how you build it for such communities, should be too. If you're in The Windy City, it may be a better idea to hit a single theme and hit it hard. After all, you're trying to grab the attention of millions of people—and competing with thousands of other lawyers. If you're practicing in Wyoming's capital city, though, there are fewer people and fewer attorneys. You may be able to craft a more nuanced and dimensional brand.

Consumer Preferences:

As was noted in The Trusted Advisor sample brand, many attorneys think legal consumers want to be wowed with dense legalese. Research performed by Thomson Reuters, however, shows that clients who hire a small law firm or solo attorney more typically want someone who understands their situation and can outline steps to various outcomes. This is an example of a shift in consumer trends that you need to take into account as you design your brand.



Starting off on the right foot

With so many touchpoints facing legal consumers, a marketing strategy focused on “just showing up” isn’t going to deliver. Instead, your firm needs to establish brand authority among your current and future clients. As you move forward with developing a brand for your law firm, take your time and stress-test the concepts you generate. Your law firm’s brand is important, and the investment you make to develop and grow your brand can help keep your firm top of mind with your desired audience.



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