

Brand (con)Fusion

A brand can be a meaningless mish-mash that is not consistent with what a law firm or its employees offer or do - or it can be a firm's most valuable asset.

By Sean Larkan

Nowadays, the term "brand" is frequently mentioned in law firms but is often misunderstood. The potential value of brand (for top-tier firms, in the billions of dollars) is seldom appreciated, and it is rarely correctly managed as a dynamic asset requiring constant review.

Few law firm partners and employees fully understand brand. Even fewer can articulate their own firm's brand. Ask them to describe the firm's brand and you will receive many different answers, ranging from the perceptive to the vague.

Many firms describe their brand in limited terms covering names, logos, styles, color schemes and websites, but of course these are merely symbols for the brand. Others feel that they have "done brand" because the logo and color scheme were re-jigged a year or two back.

To maximize brand value, law firms need to develop and articulate a consistent philosophy, which staff and partners endorse and confidently embody in all their interactions with clients and other stakeholders.

Successfully fusing a firm's brand with firm and staff behavior creates an enormously valuable asset. Apple is a premier example of this, where every product, advertisement, specialized store and even the personnel reflect key characteristics of the brand.

Over the past decade the Brand Fusion methodology has been developed and has evolved to provide law firms with a simple, effective framework to understand, build and get full value for their brand. This program assists law firms to match the various things that make up their brand offering with client and stakeholder perception and experiences of that offering - achieving "brand fusion" and avoiding a damaging "brand gap."

The Brand Fusion philosophy:

- ensures a firm and its employees are clear and unified about what the firm offers to its internal and external markets and stakeholders- something like Clifford

Chance's recent incursion into the Australian market - very focused, in this instance around a small limited suite of service offerings;

- emphasizes that firm brand statements must match what is actually experienced by clients and stakeholders to achieve "brand fusion";
- recognizes that brand warrants a separate strategy and disciplined management, and that this strategy must tie in with organizational strategy to avoid a "brand gap";
- uses clear language and is simplified;
- involves everyone in a firm in developing and implementing brand and clarifies for them what brand is and is *not* - ensuring that at every touch-point, wherever others see or experience the brand, that it happens in a consistent way;
- sets a clear goal of achieving a brand for which there is no substitute;
- recognizes that brand is dynamic and needs constant renewal;
- demonstrates that brand must be managed in three major areas - for the firm, for individual partners and in relation to the firm's employment brand - each area needs specific treatment to achieve maximum brand value;
- builds dynamic resilience into the brand strategy to ensure the brand can withstand whatever the market throws at it, and
- finally, clarifies that brand is not something to be fobbed off to the marketing department; it is a strategic issue of top import requiring senior leadership and partner involvement.

As a strategic, high-value asset, brand warrants thorough treatment and consideration. Everyone within a law firm must fully understand and support the firm brand if this asset is to achieve its potential. This is becoming even more important as changing communication channels such as social media severely stress-test the strengths and gaps in brands.

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