LJN Law Journal Newsletters
Marketing The Law Firm™

Forget Your Firm; Market Your Partners!

October 2004
By John Hellerman, Hellerman Baretz Communications

Recently, at the American Bar Association Annual Meeting in Atlanta, Deval Patrick, the General Counsel (GC) of the Coca-Cola Company, said: "We are not hiring law firms, we're hiring lawyers."

Many, many GCs say the same thing. Seriously, by now this has become cliché in the legal services market: time and time again, in-house General Counsels say they hire lawyers not law firms. So why in the world do firms spend so much time and money marketing themselves rather than their attorneys and (at most) practice groups that are the actual marketplace products?

OK, practically speaking, we know that what GCs really mean is that they hire good lawyers who work for "safe" firms. But what makes a firm safe? Its reputation, which is obtained by the results and successes that individual partners achieve over time.

Law firms become branded, therefore, by the quality and reliability of their "product lines" — the work of their individual partners in different practice niches. A good analogy in the corporate arena is Nike. Within each of Nike's product lines (basketball, tennis, golf, etc.), the company markets and sells many different "brands" — each brand with its own marketing strategy, demographics and purpose.

How does this apply? Well, this is going to be a strange piece of advice to read about in a publication called Marketing the Law Firm, but here goes: If you want the biggest return on investment (ROI) from your marketing dollars, stop trying to "brand" your firm. In fact, for just a little while, forget about marketing your firm altogether and instead, focus on marketing your products — your lawyers. In the corporate world, these would be called the company's "brands."

Now, it's important to note that I am not suggesting that a firm market its lawyers like the Coca Cola Company would market Coke or Nike Inc. would market shoes. Of course it's true — no matter what some might argue — that the same tactics and strategies used to promote consumer products are NOT appropriate to promote professionals (people are not bars of soap, shoes, or bottles of soda). However, in the marketplace and in the context for looking at HOW and WHAT to market, what I'm suggesting is this: Law firms are not Coke. Law firms are not Tide. Law firms are not Cheerios. In the legal marketplace, law firms are the Coca-Cola Company. Law firms are Proctor & Gamble. Law firms are General Mills.

In short, your firm is not the brand it's the "brand marketer."

The sooner a firm comes to realize that this is its role in the market, the faster it can apply its marketing investments to strategies and tactics that will actually drive revenue.

For instance, how much money do you spend advertising and promoting the firm as a whole versus the individual attorneys or practice groups? When you think about what you're actually selling, why tolerate such a striking difference?

How much do you know about Coca-Cola Company? Did you know that Coca-Cola Company was founded in 1886, and the Company is the world's leading manufacturer, marketer, and distributor of nonalcoholic beverage concentrates and syrups, used to produce nearly 400 beverage brands? Or that there corporate headquarters are in Atlanta, with local operations in over 200 countries around the world?

I doubt it. And who cares? Indeed, what does any of it have to do with how you'll decide to quench your thirst?

We know Coke. We know Minute Maid. We know Dasani water. In fact, out of Coca-Cola's nearly 400 brands (products), as individual consumers we probably only know 10 or so, and only really care about two or three (if that).

The company is successful because of the pleasing attributes of the product not vice-versa. Now, substitute "400 brands" with "400 lawyers" and the conclusion seems obvious. Invest in branding individual attorneys and practices (each with its own marketing strategy, demographics and purpose) and the reputation, position, and success of the firm as a whole will follow.

John Hellerman *is a partner in Hellerman Baretz Communications LLC, a consulting firm specializing in strategic media relations, crisis communications and litigation public relations for law firms and other professional service organizations. He can be reached at 202-274-4762 or jhellerman@hellermanbaretz.com.*

Reprinted with permission of ALM Law Journal Newsletters *Marketing The Law Firm*