

Playing the Name Game

Many law firms are rethinking their monikers. Should yours?



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Petal, Petal, Leaf, Thorn and Vine sounds sweeter as Rose LLP. That deceptively simple truth stands behind two current trends in law firm naming: putting fewer partners on the firm masthead or alternatively, abandoning surnames entirely in favour of a descriptive “trade” name.

Fourscore and seven years ago. . .

Traditionally, Canadian law firms were named after two or three founding partners. Not infrequently, an additional name or two would be added as the next generation of firm leadership stepped to the forefront. Time marched on. Established firms merged and successor firms were suddenly at three, four or even five names. During the 1990’s we also saw the rise of the national firms, and suddenly the complexity of name proliferation was ratcheted up another notch as several long-established firms – each with its own bushel of existing names - came together under one long banner. Lengthy conference call arguments over the exact composition of that banner ensued.

Legal Names vs Street Names

For anyone working at a multi-name firm, telling others where you worked came to be reminiscent of an attendance-taking roll call. As you listed off surname after surname, one could actually see people’s eyes begin to glaze over with boredom. Inevitably, common sense prevailed and any firm with three or more names developed a dual identity, with the full legal name being supplanted in everyday conversation by a one or two word “street name”.

Rethinking the Classic Approach: Brevity is in

Fast forward to present day: spurred by a competitive legal environment, the influence of corporate marketing tactics, and a belated recognition of the general stodginess that is projected by a five-name name, several law firms both here in Canada and south of the border have chosen to cut loose the



shackles of tradition and go with shorter, more corporate-sounding names that project a more modern image.

But change doesn't come easily, or inexpensively for that matter. Tradition, partner pride, and the costs associated with making a name switch are all significant factors that must be accounted for when a law firm considers a name change. Nevertheless, for many firms, the pros are increasingly outweighing the cons and we can expect the migration towards shorter names will continue.

Enter the Brand Name

Some firms engaged in re-naming have adopted a middle path, taking a shortened version of their name and giving it formal recognition as a "brand name" used in marketing and advertising material, while still retaining a longer legal name. One high profile example is Fasken Martineau DuMoulin LLP (legal name), which goes by Fasken Martineau in an advertising and marketing context (brand name) and is usually referred to in the legal world as simply "Faskens" (street name). South of the border, the multi-office Orrick, Herrington and Sutcliffe LLP has re-branded around "Orrick" and uses a simple "O" as their logo, but still retains its longer legal name as well. Likewise, Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dore LLP has adopted the one word "WilmerHale" as its new brand identity.

Back in Canada, several firms have taken the re-naming process one step further and simplified this complex nomenclature by changing their legal name to match their brand or street name. In British Columbia, the erstwhile Harper Grey Easton transitioned last year to a two-name format and is now Harper Grey LLP. Bryan Baynham, Q.C. explains:

"We appreciated the value in the marketplace of having a shorter name. It is easier to remember, and it reflected the name we are known by in the legal community. Our retired partner Don Easton supported the change."

According to Allison Wolf, Harper Grey's Marketing Manager, the firm also managed to deftly side-step the cost hurdle associated with shortening its name by making the switch during the firm's changeover to LLP status:

"We were already incurring the cost to legally change our name and produce new collateral material



as part of the LLP process, so it was the obvious time to address shortening the name as well.”

Firms previously comprised of three, four or five partner names are now being streamlined to a more manageable two names, or – for the particularly bold - even one. In the solo-name category, the one-time Tory Tory, DesLauriers & Binnington is now simply Torys LLP. The erstwhile Goodman and Goodman, after moving through a merger incarnation as Goodman Phillips and Vineberg, has now de-merged into a succinct Goodmans LLP. Goodmans also made its newly-single name the centerpiece of a new brand identity and marketing campaign following the renaming, and was promptly awarded with a “best of show” award as the best law firm branding campaign in North America in 2005 by the Chicago-based Legal Marketing Association.

Descriptive Names Work Too

While name shortening is prevalent among established firms, several newer firms have taken advantage of the fact they are starting with a clean-slate by eschewing surnames entirely in favour of a descriptive “trade name”. Examples of the trade name approach include Embarkation Law Group (immigration lawyers) Nexus Law Group LLP (intellectual property) and Legacy Tax + Trust Lawyers (tax, trusts & estate planning) all of Vancouver.

Elaine Reynolds, a principal at Legacy, says that the six year old firm had its genesis in the merging of the tax and trust groups from two other firms, resulting in a new third entity with seven senior practitioners, none of whom had a more compelling ownership claim on the firm name than any of the others. The group wrestled with a fitting name strategy until partner James Shumka had a Eureka moment one night, and Legacy Tax + Trusts Lawyers was born. Reynolds says that six years on, the firm’s lawyers have absolutely no regrets over their distinctive choice of name, and that both clients and other lawyers frequently comment favourably on it.

If You are Thinking about a Change

There are several factors to consider if you are thinking of a name change:

- What do your existing clients know you as? This is a good starting point for where you might want to go;



- Memorability is key: if you are picking and choosing amongst surnames, opt for distinctive choices over more common ones; with trade names, look for something that has both a descriptive and an emotional component;
- Be brief: branding research indicates people typically remember only two or three syllables in a business name so be prepared to make hard choices when it comes to those second, third and fourth names;
- For trade names, don't box yourself into too narrow a niche that you may quickly outgrow;
- Finally, don't underestimate the time and costs involved in a name change – your name is at the very core of your brand so if you are going to do it, you need to do it right.

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