



Craft the right message to stand out from crowd

Many firms can sound similar, so inject personality

By Natalie Alcoba

July 11 2014 issue

When Ben Hanuka began practising law some 15 years ago, the elder statesmen of the courtroom recoiled at the mere suggestion that they were in a business.

"This is not a business, young lawyer. This is a profession," judges would say to him. Nowadays, lawyers have accepted that there is a business side to their trade, and many are turning to brand wizards to help distinguish them from the pack.

It's a topic that has generated considerable debate between those who think messaging should only apply to an area of practice, or even just star lawyers, and those who see benefit in a unifying tagline.

"Branding is not a tactical thing," says Toronto-based marketing expert Sandra Bekhor. "This is an investment in your long-term future. It lays down the foundation for all your marketing."

And crafting a message, she suggests, starts with the firm asking itself: what is it that makes it great?

"I think it's a mistake to start thinking about, 'What does my client want to hear?' That's why a lot of branding messages sound the same," says Bekhor of Bekhor Management.

Rather, firms should look to a firm brand or tagline to add an emotional layer on what can otherwise be a clinical experience. Firms with an array of expertise areas needn't shy away from implementing solid branding principles, argues Bekhor, since they can tap into an overarching promise that applies to all facets.

"A tagline should not be just a catchy marketing phrase," says Hanuka, who established Law Works, a boutique firm that focuses on franchise disputes, in Toronto two years ago.

He spent a good month thinking about why a client would hire his firm over any of his competitors. He would jot down ideas on a series of whiteboards in his office and came up with a healthy list.

For a message to resonate, the firm has to have a handle on what it stands for, says Carol Panasiuk, a communications expert and principal at The Communications Department. A read on the clientele is also important and Panasiuk says companies may have to enlist the help of focus groups or hand out questionnaires to drill down into how they are perceived. It might also require the firm to do some groundwork to ensure it can stand behind the promise it is making. "You don't want to change it every five minutes," says Panasiuk. "It's something you're going to live with for a while."

Branding is as much an internal exercise as it is an external one, adds Bekhor. Often, however, companies will develop a logo and a tagline, only to have it "sit there." She suggests a formal launch that explains to everyone in the office what the brand means. It is "more than just an FYI," she notes, and should show people where the phrase came from and how each person is going to participate in the idea, so that it "becomes alive." Principals in a firm could tell stories about why they founded the practice, or detail meaningful days in their career at the kickoff.

That way, the rest of the firm will feel like they are involved in something bigger than themselves, says Bekhor, and they can start understanding their role in it.

"They're not just roommates in an office, they're sharing common values, a common vision," says Bekhor.

For Sara Cohen, founder of Fertility Law Canada and a partner at D2Law, branding was about evoking a certain feeling, "without shoving it in your face.

"I wanted it to set the tone, that it's a little bit more collaborative," she said. They came up with the tagline "Fertility Law Canada: helping to build families" themselves and enlisted the help of a designer for the logo.

"Something that differentiates me in what I do is a lot of care, and a lot of caring. It's an ethically difficult area in which I practise, and I think what I do can be really dignified and be really respectful and respectable...working together collaboratively, I wanted to get that across."

Taglines come in various shapes and sizes. They can be as short as one word, if you build a story around it through the rest of the marketing, says Bekhor. Some

firms opt for more detailed descriptions online, since space isn't a constraint. Law Works uses "Canadian Franchise Lawyers" because "that's what Google likes," says Hanuka.

"For promotional purposes, it has to be way more sophisticated," says Hanuka, who includes a longer mission statement on the website. "I think uniqueness is the key."

When Andrew Feldstein started his firm, family law was a litigation-oriented practice. But that has changed, and so, too, has the branding. Instead of asking prospective clients to "put us in your corner and we'll fight for your rights," Feldstein Family Law Group uses messaging that focuses on people being aware of their legal rights and protecting them.

"People want to get to resolution," says Feldstein, who noted that the former tagline turned some people off because it was seen as "too aggressive." Experts acknowledge, however, that it's difficult to measure the success of a brand. Feldstein says he is constantly looking at his statistics and receives monthly reports that look at how the firm is faring compared to the same time last year.

Branding can also guide how a firm behaves on a case-by-case basis.

Hanuka, of Law Works, says he has responded to conflicting propositions by reverting back to his established list of core principles and values. They reminded him of what he wanted to do when he first started the firm. "Because it's so easy to lose track of that and get buried in the trees, not see the forest. It's important to come back to it," he says.

<http://www.lawyersweekly.ca/index.php?section=article&volume=34&number=10&article=5>