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How Image Advertising can *Become* a Critical Communication.

The question of "does advertising work" is a common one among lawyers and law marketers, and wide-ranging surveys are routinely undertaken to ascertain the answer. The answer ranges between "maybe" and "sometimes." The answer truly depends upon whether it is *good* advertising or not. Most law firm advertising is not.

Why is that?

Here's the short answer - most is not don't work, because (1) there's no real strategy behind them, and/or (2) they're not designed in a way to get noticed.

No survey will be effective that doesn't take into consideration your cultural willingness to stand out from the pack and do great ads, and then the capabilities of your advertising team to create them. Here's the short answer – most don't work, because (1) there's no real strategy behind them, and/or (2) they're not designed in a way to get noticed.

Remember, ads are an intrusion into the readers' lives. Someone said once – look at how people read magazines in an airport. How much time do they spend on any page? A couple seconds at most. Give them the slightest chance to ignore you and they'll take it. Good doesn't work. Only GREAT cuts through the clutter. And how much *great* is there in ANY industry?

In the past five years I've been involved in 25 strategic branding campaigns that have involved both advertising and design components. Here's what I've learned:

Preparing for a speech to the LMA's New England Chapter, I undertook a broad survey of law firm advertisements, and compared them to what the advertising industry considers its best work in a series of annual advertising award books.

Good advertising is incredibly powerful, a critical communicator.
Bad advertising is an enormous waste of money.

Objectively evaluated, most law firm advertising ranges between mediocre and terrible, and the larger the firm (or really the larger the committee approving the ads), the more likely they will stink.

Why does so much advertising stink? For the same reason it does in most other industries. It's HARD to do great work, particularly so for clients who do not understand the difference (and why should they? Our clients don't understand the nuances of the law either). So what do they want? What's easy to sell to lawyers? "Pretty" instead of strategic. We have to do a better job of educating them about how advertising works. And keep them away from people who sell design services for advertising projects.

Every brochure designer thinks they can create ads - hey, it's all graphic images, right? Here's the recipe: find a pun for the headline, list the firm's practice areas and offices, and sprinkle into the body copy a healthy selection of the words experience, skills, full-service, high-quality, commitment, and service. Then artistically overlay a collection of themed images on top of each other to create a colorful montage.

Here are the themes:

Have international offices or want to show that your firm is "global?"
Use globes or maps.

Want to make sure your audience knows that the ad is a law firm's?
Use columns, scales of justice, or a gavel.

Interesting in proving that you're tough litigators?
Use courthouse steps or boxing gloves.

Selling your creativity?
Use a picture of a lightbulb.

Want to show you're a high-tech, IP, or tech-oriented firm?
Use images of CDs, laptop computers, DNA strands, glowing beakers, a Space Shuttle, or a mad scientist.

Want to convey that you're innovative, or that you achieve results, or are committed to your clients? Just SAY that as the headline -- with an elegant new typeface.

Designers. . . .

Here's what they don't tell you -- advertising and design are COMPLETELY DIFFERENT skill sets. Both are talented people with skills I sincerely admire and respect, but they are DIFFERENT.

What's the difference?

ADVERTISERS simplify complex concepts.
DESIGNERS create pretty layouts.

ADVERTISERS create truly clever headlines, finding a new way of looking at something with a simple visual concept.
DESIGNERS create attractive visuals, too often with the aforementioned clichés.

ADVERTISERS are eccentric geniuses who look at things in an entirely new way -- think Einstein. The best ones can visually or conceptually simplify a complex subject. They should come up with concept and then hand it off to design experts to produce it.

DESIGNERS are artistes, like Monet. They can take a blank piece of paper and make it beautiful. They should draft brochures, logos, stationery systems, *etc.*

ADVERTISERS often draw in stick figures.
DESIGNERS have degrees in Fine Arts, they often paint, sculpt.

ADVERTISERS stare out their windows and have pencils stuck in their ceiling.
DESIGNERS use Macs.

ADVERTISERS can be terrible designers, and create sloppy brochures.
DESIGNERS create pretty, boring, non-strategic ads.

With practice, you can always tell the difference between an ad conceived by a true advertising creative, and one created by a designer. Creatives simplify, they distill, they identify an entirely new way of looking at something.

Of course, some great ad campaigns get so watered down by client committees that there's nothing left but the clichés. As the creatives get gradually beaten down, they lose interest. My ad guys assure me that this happens in every industry, whether you're selling services, soup or soap.

Don't let a designer design your ads - they'll be pretty but not strategic.

How well can your advertising work? It depends upon two factors: (1) your firm's cultural tolerance for great creative and (2) the creative capabilities of your advertising team to create them.

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Good doesn't work. Only GREAT cuts through the clutter. And how much *great* is there in ANY industry?

Sure, your designers will tell you they can design ads to match. They're wrong. Bring it to an advertising or branding agency that has BOTH skills and uses completely different experts to do them. Read up on advertising before you

That's one reason I recommend an industry-focused approach. It's easier to be great when it will only be seen by a narrow audience. It won't be seen as potentially "offending" non-industry clients. Most firms can be much more effective in this narrowed direction than they could be if they tried to find a unified message for the entire firm. Not that that's not possible, but the bigger the firm (and ad-approving committee), the less likely something truly unique will escape.

Every lawyer thinks they can design ads and/or write copy. Do our ads stink? But no worse than in any other industry. Some are great. Most aren't. Some are total disasters. It's hard to be great. Some creatives don't have the skills. Some clients couldn't get greatness through the committee. Many of the mediocre ads you see in *Corporate Legal Times*, for example, started out great and ended up as look-alikes because the lawyers wouldn't accept anything else.

Keep the two skill sets apart. Find incredibly creative, strategic advertising creatives, and set them loose. Don't let them anywhere near traditional design activities. Use designers for your brochures, logos, and stationery systems, but keep them away from your ads. Purchasing ad space is too expensive to waste it on ads no one will notice -- or care about if they do.

What *should* advertising convey?

What your organization stands for, and what you can do for the reader. And it should convey it through the use of powerful imagery.

Great advertising has been compared to a stop sign. It is relevant; it has a simple message which it conveys in one word with a simple, clear layout-- no explanation needed. Is your advertising a stop sign? There are some great text-only ads that are stop signs too. Brobeck's controversial 2000-2001 ad campaign is text only, but the design and colors tells you whose ad it is from across the room. The questioning headlines (e.g. "Seriously?") is enough to make you stop and look.

Isn't that better than an ad that says "Committed to your service."

The good news for me is that I think there's more quality advertising running right now than has been developed in the past decade. As more law firms start to figure it out, more firms will be willing to utilize it strategically, and there will be more tangible results.

That creates more opportunity to do good creative work that generates business.

Sure, your designers will tell you they can design ads to match the brochure. They're wrong. Bring it to an advertising or branding agency that has BOTH skills and uses completely different experts to do them. Read up on advertising before you select an agency or embark upon an ad campaign. Take a critical look at their creative book and see how they have handled a range of solutions.

That's one reason I recommend an industry-focused approach. It's easier to be great when it will only be seen by a narrow audience. It won't be seen as potentially "offending" non-industry clients. It doesn't have to fight its way through as large a committee. Most firms can be much more effective in this narrowed direction than they could be if they tried to find a unified message for the entire firm. Not that that's not possible, but the bigger the firm (and ad-approving committee), the less likely something truly unique will escape.

Done right, advertising can be one of the most powerful tools in a firm's marketing arsenal.