

Q: We're trying to differentiate our firm. What are some of the ways firms can do that?

A: There are as many different possibilities as there are firms. For example, if a large firm has a particularly strong practice in a valuable area, with visionary leadership, it's possible even for a full-service firm to brand itself around that group -- like full-service Skadden Arps did around M&A in the early 1980s. Done well, the credibility of that group's brand benefits all the other areas -- but that's a *very* hard sell internally and takes unusually strong leadership to select one area to the exclusion of all others ("Hey, what about *my* practice area?").

Of course, since many mid-sized and large firms provide a full range of services and don't have strong leadership, internal politics prevent branding around a single group. Fine. If practice-area branding is not right for a firm, then brand around something else. There are plenty of options. Some firms brand themselves around a particular geographic region, like Kelli Wight's great "America's Canadian Law Firm" concept at Toronto's McMillan Binch, or Tom Kane's well-known work at Carlton Fields with "THE Florida Firm."

Some firms brand on "price/value" (I have a client using it in the price- competitive insurance industry); and in 1995 we branded around "client service" at Ungaretti & Harris with the Written Service Guarantee. Barbara Harrison-Kaye did some landmark work at Cleveland's Baker & Hostetler in the early 1990s with its "industry teams" (although most of the legal profession missed it because it's focused at, well, specific industries). The world is full of terrific ideas if you keep an eye out for them.

I'm finding that persuading bigger firms of the value of positioning is getting easier as lawyers see more good case studies around them. With the right position, selling the idea is possible, but still a careful education process is necessary; this concept *so* foreign to most lawyers.

When I do this with larger firms, I start with a historical overview of marketing from the 1978 Bates decision and move forward from there. They must be educated thoroughly from the top down, using lots of examples, but there are enough good examples in their daily world that they learn fast.

Finally, the position selected *must* be a realistic fit with who the firm really *is*. Good marketing can create a brand out of thin air, but to sustain it for the long-term future, it must be closely linked to the firm's culture and personality. This is *critical*, so make sure that one of the first steps in the process is careful interviews with a good cross-section of the firm, including secretaries and administrative staff members as well as associates and senior partners.