

# I'LL BUY YOUR VIOLETS

## *But Not From Your Ad*

**W**e have a paradox in professional services marketing. It's called advertising.

On the one hand, the past few years have seen a rash of law and accounting firm advertising. On the other hand, as the economists say, everybody has an opinion about it, most of which is skewed by every possible wrong reason for judging advertising.

And if there is a third hand, it's that based on my experience in advertising for law and accounting firms, I'm not really sure that most of it it works. I do know with a great certainty that it doesn't work for professional firms the way it works for products. In fact, I'm not sure that many of the advertising agencies doing some of these ads really understand that difference. And that opinion is from someone – namely me – who has done a lot of successful advertising. There you have another paradox.

I sometimes think that advertising designers, for both product and professional services advertising, have lost their way. In attempting to penetrate a dense jungle of competing attempts to capture attention, and the minds of increasingly jaded audiences, they go so far out on flights of imagination that it becomes difficult to tell where creativity outruns marketing and becomes simply an exercise in creative ego. Don't we increasingly see ads in which the message is so obtuse that you can't tell what they're trying to sell?

A few basic points. Advertising a product is successful when the ads sell a lot of the products. Few law or accounting ad campaigns are likely to persuade somebody to hire a lawyer or an accountant who doesn't need one at the moment. The example I've used forever is that all the advertising in the world isn't going to persuade a happily married person to get a divorce. Or cause an individual to file a law suit or get an audit that isn't required by law or a financial institution. This is not only a major difference, but it substantially alters advertising technique. When professional services advertising does work, it's because the name of the advertised firm has staying power in the target audience's memory, and because the advertising projects quality that enhances trust and projects capabilities. It takes a kind of magic to make that happen.

Most of the advertising being done, even by the largest firms, presumably using top ad agencies, seems to violate everything we do know about advertising. Basic rules, such as relating copy to headlines and relating illustration in some way to copy. The ads currently around seem to violate these rules like back country moonshiners.

A basic advertising rule has always been that no ad campaign has any impact with just one or two ads. Few of the current crop of legal and accounting ads seem to run more than two or three times. The funny thing is that some of the campaigns that do run consistently, are not always particularly good, or even rational.

Then there's the rule that you can't adequately judge somebody else's ad campaign without understanding the campaign's objectives. This rule is often ignored, particularly by lawyers or accountants who see only the ad's aesthetics, without understanding what the advertisers are trying to accomplish. Some very good ads are designed, for example, solely to keep the people in the firm hyped up around an internal idea. That's why you can often ignore people who like or dislike an ad or campaign. It's like judging the speed of a racing yacht by its name or the color of its sails.

You can judge a product ad campaign by the number of products it sells. Because the value of professional services advertising is more esoteric, there's rarely a direct relationship between the ad campaign and new client development.

There are professionals, too, who think that all advertising diminishes the aura of professionalism in some vaguely unethical way. This, of course, is nonsense, particularly in today's competitive environment for professional services.

Does advertising for professionals ever work? Well, most professional services advertising has one ultimate objective -- to enhance name recognition and impart a sense of the kind and quality of work done by the firm. And the idea is to do this despite the limitations of professional ethics. You can't say we do better audits or write better briefs. But if name recognition is all that advertising is about, why waste all that money on copy and concept and design? Why not just say, "Smith & Dale is a law firm that does good work!"? It beats attempts to be cute or funny, which most people don't know how to do anyway.

With all the restrictions on professional services advertising, it's extremely difficult to credibly convey value and differentiation, which is why so much advertising doesn't work. Bad advertising can sometimes sell a product, but rarely can it help a law or accounting firm, other than by simply repeating and shouting its name.

In marketing professional services, advertising rarely earns its keep on its own. It has to be backed up by other marketing efforts. It has to be coordinated with a lot of different marketing tools. And what's even tougher, professional services marketing depends upon the individual lawyers or accountants who have to perform the services, a singular peculiarity of professional services marketing. The ads that I think do work -- including those I've done that succeeded -- are those that address a specific problem and offer a specific solution, or a credible benefit.

Advertising -- and marketing as well -- is an art form, which means that all the rules have successful exceptions. But exceptions they are, which means they deviate from otherwise working rules.

And when it does work, does anybody ask if the return warrants the size of the investment?

I suspect that advertising can contribute to marketing professional services. But not the way so much of it is being used today.

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