

Q: Did marketing kill Brobeck?

A: Yeah, I think it probably did.

We were working with a leading Silicon Valley law firm shortly before Brobeck's meteoric rise, the talented marketing director said that Brobeck wasn't a technology firm. Just about a year later, Brobeck was at the top of some perception surveys for its practice, proving what effective marketing can do. Through effective external marketing, the firm grew like crazy, its reputation changed, and profits doubled, then doubled again. Then, the tech bust showed the flaw of the underlying strategy.

Was it a great example of what marketing can do? Yes, I believe it is another exceptional case study demonstrating the power of creative marketing, executed effectively.

It also shows the direct ramifications of an inherently flawed strategy.

Effective marketing led to its amazing rise. Then the market tanked and toppled the whole house of cards.

And further, should marketing help develop the strategy? Of course. Who's in a better position to do so? Who pays more attention to the marketplace than marketers?

Was that likely to happen within Brobeck's culture? I don't know, probably not. But I value the creative minds and strategic thinking of many of my senior law marketing friends a heckuva lot more than those working at the large consulting companies who are developing the strategies that the managing partners at large firms rely on.

Why? Much of it is a question of perception. Big consulting companies understand the optics of conducting seemingly exhaustive research and endless interviews. They know how impressive it is to receive a thick, well-reasoned plan. I've seen essentially the same cookie-cutter Strategic Plan presented to many completely different similarly sized firms, but the managing partners have no way of knowing that they're receiving a standard form.

I was quoted on the front page of the National Law Journal many years ago saying that in time, marketers would be running law firms, and I still believe it. It is incumbent upon us to avoid helping execute an inherently flawed strategy. And, if the firm seems to have no real strategy -- and many don't -- figure one out and pitch it to management. I know an awful lot of firms where the marketers gave the firm the only strategy it has ever possessed.