

Q: How can we differentiate our full-service firm if it's just like every other firm?

A: If you know what to look for, you can always find a differentiator. We've helped brand dozens of firms in various ways, perhaps 50 firms in the last eight years including full-service mid-sized and larger firms, and we have always been able to find something unique and marketable about them.

On the surface, law firms appear nearly identical but, time after time, firm after firm, we can find positive, marketable, client-oriented differences. Typically, the firms themselves can't identify what's unique about them, but after interviewing enough lawyers, if you ask the right questions and know what to listen for, a theme arises. Some firms are more creative or more responsive or more intellectual -- or more practical, speedier, tougher or nicer to work with. They can be the biggest firm in their little market, or have the most geographic coverage or be overwhelmingly specializing in a particular type of work or industry . . .

OK, *twice* I have represented firms that had absolutely nothing remotely interesting or unique about them. Nothing. Nada. In both cases they admitted this right up front. In both cases we were able to mask their astonishing blandness with sufficiently interesting marketing materials that they still benefited enormously financially from the effort and never knew that they'd stumped me.

The trickier firms are the "lawyer malls" we occasionally encounter -- firms that are really only collections of solos sharing space and administrative expenses. Those firms are tougher to market because they really don't have a culture. Frankly, they rarely want to do any decent marketing anyway, because they can't seem to figure out who's going to pay for it out of what budget, and are rarely willing to spend even the minimal amount necessary to be effective.

The brand isn't created first and forced onto the organization, it grows from it. Sure the Chicago Cubs and NY Yankees both play baseball, but their brand and reputation is quite different. Yes, big groups of full-service business-oriented lawyers do pretty much the same thing, but I view *e.g.* Skadden Arps and Sidley Austin Brown & Wood as having entirely different personalities.

Once you help a firm identify and build its brand, it becomes self-reinforcing. If I found something meaningful, by simply telling them what their real differentiator is, it reinforces that type of behavior. It gives them permission to act that way, and encourages them to do more of it, which orients them further in that direction. "Fast" firms look for new systems or technology that make them faster still. "Responsive" firms start to reward increasingly responsive behavior more than other firms do, which makes them even more responsive, *etc.*