

New brand world: How law firms brand and re-brand

Janet Ellen Raasch

Janet Ellen Raasch is a writer, ghostwriter and blogger (www.constantcontentblog.com) who works closely with professional services providers – especially lawyers, law firms, legal consultants and legal organizations – to help them achieve name recognition and new business through publication of keyword-rich content for the web and social media sites as well as articles and books for print. She can be reached at (303) 399-5041 or jeraasch@msn.com.

In the old West, there were a lot of cattle milling about. In order to tell one animal from another, each owner had a unique brand.

More recently, Mad Men and their successors expanded the concept of brands to the consumer marketplace, to distinguish one product from another. We all recognize Volvo (safety), Nike (Just do it) and Frontier Airlines (A whole different animal).

Today, the concept of branding has been further expanded to the professional services industry. With so many lawyers and law firms milling about, a brand is a valuable way to distinguish one lawyer and one law firm from another.

What is a law firm brand? It is the firm's reputation, its promise to the marketplace. This is who we are. This is what we do. This is who we do it for. This is what makes us different from every other lawyer or law firm that claims to do the same thing.

By chance or on purpose, each law firm has a brand. If no one knows who you are and what you do, you have a weak brand. If potential clients at least recognize your name or tagline, you have a moderate brand. If potential clients know who you are and what you do, and for whom, you have a strong brand. You'll be on their short list.

A law firm brand is not a commodity that can be pulled off a shelf. It must be one of a kind and true to the firm's culture. The branding process requires research (including client research), creative thought, consensus-building, and consistent internal and external communication. The brand promise is conveyed by both words (like a tagline and content) and graphics (like a logo and layout).

Successful law firm branding and re-branding was discussed by a panel of law firm professionals at the July 10 program of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association (www.legalmarketing.org/rockymountain), held at Fogo de Chao restaurant in LoDo, Denver.

Panelists included Koree Khongphand-Buckman, regional marketing director of Hogan Lovells (www.hoganlovells.com), David McCann, senior manager for marketing and communications for Snell & Wilmer (www.swlaw.com), and Heather Nanstiel, senior designer for Holland & Hart (www.hollandhart.com). Moderator was Phil Nugent, managing director of NCG Strategic Marketing (www.ncgmarketing.com).

Each speaker discussed the recent branding or re-branding process at his or her firm.

Hogan Lovells

In May of 2010, Washington D.C.-based Hogan & Hartson merged with London-based Lovells to create Hogan Lovells, a massive global law firm with 2,500 lawyers working from more than 40 offices located in 22 countries around the world. Its promise is to be the best provider of corporate legal services to multi-national businesses.

“We faced a truly daunting challenge,” said Khongphand-Buckman. “Internally, we needed to unify all of these individuals, from different cultures and speaking different languages, under one banner that would define and differentiate the firm -- and engender loyalty. Externally, we needed to communicate this new identity to clients.

“First off, we needed a new name that recognized both parents,” said Khongphand-Buckman. “I came from the Hogan & Hartson side, and we were very pleased that ‘Hogan’ came first in the new name. We know that the first name in a law firm name often becomes the ‘street’ name among clients.

“From the Lovells parent, we inherited a very distinctive citric green color,” said Khongphand-Buckman. “Right before the merger, Lovells had spent a lot of time and work choosing that color, including extensive research into the meaning of various colors in cultures around the world.

“The intense new color was hard for a lot of our more conservative lawyers to swallow at first,” said Khongphand-Buckman. “They wanted to change it. We had to remind them that use of this color was part of the merger agreement they had signed.

“There are still quite a few of our lawyers who do not love the new color, but they appreciate it,” said Khongphand-Buckman. “We have worked hard to explain the rationale behind it. Most of them understand the way this color sets us apart from other firms. At a recent conference, our bright green booth signage earned many converts.”

Hogan Lovells logistics

Once the firm had a name, a color and a logo, these had to be quickly applied to vast quantities of print and electronic materials – without word of the merger getting out ahead of time. Old materials had to be tracked down and taken out of circulation.

“Here in Denver, for example, we had a table sponsorship for an event the same month that the merger was announced,” said Khongphand-Buckman. “We had to make sure that our new logo appeared in event materials, and at the event, without the news getting out.”

New materials in English had to work in a broad range of English-speaking countries, with a broad range of acceptable standards, spellings and usages. In addition, materials needed to be properly translated into additional languages. The firm adopted the day/month/year date standard for all of its materials in all countries, instead of the month/day/year standard more commonly used in the United States.

“We also needed to arrive at a common graphic standard for our materials,” said Khongphand-Buckman. “Here in the United States, for example, brochures use lots of white space and graphics. Elsewhere, our offices used three columns of dense, eight-point text with no art to break it up. We had to find templates that worked for everyone. Luckily, our in-house design team was up to it.

“Finally, launch of the new Hogan Lovells brand came with local commitment to an ad campaign,” said Khongphand-Buckman. “Here in Denver, we were able to run ads once a week for six months and greatly improve our name recognition. This is something we had wanted to do for a long time.”

Snell & Wilmer

Snell & Wilmer is a full-service business law firm with more than 400 lawyers in nine offices. The firm had conducted brand research in 2005 and 2006, which it used to launch a recognizable “walk the walk” ad campaign across its target audiences. However, this campaign did not extend to the firm’s other print and electronic materials.

In 2010, the firm decided to refocus and strengthen its brand. “We used the existing research,” said McCann. “Many of the lawyers remembered going through this process just a few years earlier, and we did not feel that there was a need to repeat it. Plus, the results were still valid. We found a number of lawyers who truly understood, embraced and valued the process, and recruited them for our team.

“Our previous branding efforts had a very practice-specific application,” said McCann. “We wanted to transition to something that had greater flexibility and spoke more directly to our firm-wide core strengths and values.”

Using the existing research, the group looked to capture and convey the firm’s substantive history of more than 70 years, its genuine concern for and commitment to clients, and the breadth and depth of its legal services.

“The resulting “time” theme (Strengthened by time; Tested by time; Trusted over time) was intended to focus not on how many years the firm has been in business,” said

McCann, “but rather on the soundness of the skills and commitment to client service that the firm developed over those years.”

Support messaging focuses on “Straight talk. Sound counsel. Practical solutions. At Snell & Wilmer, some things never change.” Enhanced graphic elements support the message of strength, experience and trust.

“While engaged in the branding process,” said McCann, “marketers need to appreciate the natural tension that can exist between marketers, who want to do something new and different, and lawyers, who are much more literal and comfortable with precedent.

“Be clear up front about your goals and expectations,” said McCann. “Maintain a healthy dialogue with participants. Never forget the value of compromise. Don’t let egos or minor issues prevent you from producing a quality end-product.

“Keep your perspective,” said McCann. “Remember that we are not curing cancer. Enjoy the opportunity to add real value to your firm’s efforts. Use your expertise to guide the process. In the end, launch the brand that the lawyers can live with and then concentrate on making incremental improvements going forward.”

Holland & Hart and HRO

Holland & Hart is the largest law firm in Denver, with 15 offices and more than 400 lawyers. For many years, it operated under the tagline “The Law Out West.” As the firm supplemented its regional with national and international expertise, this tagline no longer worked. The firm’s new identity is graphic – with a recognizable peak in its royal blue logo and a stylized peak as an element appearing behind other, practice-specific art.

Before joining Holland & Hart, Nanstiel was creative director for eight years with Holme Roberts & Owen, now Bryan Cave HRO. “At HRO, we had a lot of in-house experience, so we did the vast amount of research ourselves instead of hiring an outside consultant.

“Our research showed 100 years of experience and a strong client orientation as distinguishing factors for the firm,” said Nanstiel. “We wanted to focus on the client and customized solutions to the client’s problems. After reviewing more than 300 law firm taglines, to avoid repetition, we selected ‘Experience listens. Be heard.’ Many of our ads featured pairs of experienced lawyers and satisfied clients.

“Your tagline must be novel, but also appropriate,” said Nanstiel. “It must be novel enough to stand out from the crowd, but appropriate enough to be true and to match the comfort level of your firm’s internal and external audiences.

“Involve the lawyers in the committee in charge of your branding process,” said Nanstiel. “Lawyers love process. By sharing the process, you can turn them into allies and brand

ambassadors. However, lawyers are also trained to argue. Be prepared to defend your suggestions and leave yourself the ‘wobble room’ to make reasonable concessions.

“You might arrive at a brand,” said Nanstiel, “but the branding process is never done. It must be communicated to and reinforced with not only external audiences, but internal audiences as well. Lawyers and staff must be excited about the brand and eager to share it outside the office, with friends at lunch or fellow-parents at a soccer game.”

A law firm’s brand is its reputation, its promise to the marketplace. It can be weak, moderate or strong. In today’s competitive marketplace, a strong and well-thought-through brand is one way to set yourself apart from other firms and make sure your law firm ends up on the short list for new business.