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Paula Black has advised law firms around the globe on everything from powerful and innovative design to marketing strategy and business growth. She is an award-winning, Amazon-bestselling author and the force behind **In Black & White** (inblackandwhiteblog.com), a blog dedicated to clear, straightforward advice and open discussion of legal marketing issues. For more information on Paula Black, her books and her company please visit paulablacklegalmarketing.com.

Your Brand is Your Business: The 4 Common Mistakes in Law Firm Branding

When it comes to law firm marketing and business development your best efforts are only as strong as your brand. Your brand is what the world recognizes (or will come to recognize) when they think of your firm: its visual identity, its message, its voice. From website to letterhead your brand is the first thing outsiders see and perhaps the most important aspect of marketing for firms to focus on.

Once established, however, many firms (or individual lawyers) seem to get tired of it. They want to get creative, choose new colors or fonts, and establish a new message or identity. Big mistake.

One of the key strategies in creating a brand is repetition. Once you start diluting that identity you risk confusing clients and hindering business development efforts. You may be tired of the same old thing...but that's only because you see it every day. Your market doesn't. Below I've listed the four biggest mistakes firms make when it comes to their brand...and how to avoid them.

Letting a pet project overwhelm the brand.

The biggest trap law firms fall into with pet projects is letting the project drive the look and feel, rather than the firm. No matter what type of retreat, fundraiser or event your firm is participating in, the overall vision should stick closely to the original brand. This is true for everything from décor to invitations to charity journal ads. Example: A client of mine had a strong interest in the arts and once a year opened his office to the public for a private viewing of his extensive corporate art collection. Rather than letting the art collection drive the event, he stayed true to firm branding. Everything at the event (from napkins to invitations) prominently featured the colors, fonts and logo of the firm. The firm specialized in high-end litigation matters for high net-worth individuals and the event reflected that. Don't forget that everything must be done through the prism of the firm's

brand strategy...or you put your brand at risk.

Letting practice groups create their own identity.

Never forget that practice groups are part of a larger brand. Whether you have two or twenty, each group is still beholden to the identity of the firm as a whole. That means no playing with logos, colors or layouts when it comes to Power Point and other materials viewed by clients. To avoid this kind of dilution, make sure to have clear brand guidelines (where and how the logo can be placed, the colors that can be used, etc...) and, for those willing to go the extra mile, brand templates. If you must give practice areas their own identity, consider using color to differentiate between them. Keep logos and design the same, but assign each group their own specific color. This will allow the group to stand apart but be recognizable as part of the bigger firm.

Playing around with the logo.

Whether it is on letterhead or golf ball, your logo is the most prominent visual symbol of your firm. Never forget that. Many firms have a tendency to put the materials ahead of the logo and want to manipulate and rework their logo to make it fit on to whatever they're working on at that moment. From ads to T-shirts to holiday cards, never compromise your logo for the sake of design. Another brand lesson? Make sure whatever you place your logo on (pens, golf shirts, or other gifts) reflects the firm brand. If you're a large white-shoe firm you don't want your logo on silly gag gifts, whereas a smaller firm with a more casual vibe can be creative.

Creating a sub-brand.

Many law firms today are choosing to branch out into other areas of business or charitable giving, and are creating what we like to call "sub-brands" for their firm. While the new business or charity may have a vastly different mission than the law firm, it's still a part of the overall brand. To create a new and separate brand, you must go through the same process you did in creating the original, but this time keep in mind the relationship between the two. It's always a good idea to keep some semblance of the law firm brand. Easy ways to accomplish that? Similar colors or fonts, or even keeping the same icon (should you have one) with a different name. Don't throw away the power of an established brand.

The lesson here is clear: Never dilute your brand. Remember the power of repetition and the importance of establishing a clear visual connection back to your firm. Think hard about whether your materials fit into that idea and make sure that firm members are clear about how and when to use logos. Your brand is your business.