

Branding Challenges: Law Firm vs. Individual Attorneys

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As a legal marketer, the challenge of marketing your law firm versus individual attorneys is an ongoing struggle. We have all been in a meeting with a firm's "rainmaker" who wants to place an ad or produce a handout that doesn't look like the other materials the firm has produced. Instead, he wants his piece to be different and to "stand out" from the law firm's brand.

As a marketer, this goes against all we know about brand consistency, including the use of a firm's logo, fonts, colors and the overall messaging of the law firm.

Which Brand Comes First?

The issues related to law firm brands versus attorney brands parallel the age-old question: "Which came first: the chicken or the egg?" After all, a law firm cannot exist without attorneys. The fact is, most firms started out with one or two attorneys who had a growing reputation that the firm was built on. As more attorneys were added, the reputation of those attorneys enabled it to continue to grow. However, without a solid brand for the firm, relying on the reputations of the firm's founders can damage an individual attorney's ability to attract larger clients with needs that span practice areas.

The reality is that both the firm and its attorneys need to have a symbiotic relationship that balances the individual attorney's brand and the overall firm brand. Both the marketing professional and the attorney need to relax their egos some and come to an agreeable understanding. Some issues can be averted with pre-planning and tweaking of the firm's brand guidelines and marketing materials to allow for more flexibility while still maintaining a degree of consistency.

Balancing Brands

Competition is fierce in today's legal market, so it's important to have a strong firmwide brand that represents the sum of all the law firm's parts, including its reputation in the marketplace, its core competencies, its key differentiators, and the experience of its attorneys and the support staff that keep all the wheels in motion. But what room is left to insert visual elements that represent the brand of an individual attorney?

Some brand guidelines are overly rigid, making it impossible to balance the firm's brand with an attorney's brand. If this is your case, consider taking a new look at how you can adjust these

guidelines to allow for some additional flexibility.

Tweaking Your Guidelines

A firm's identity is conveyed through its branding elements, such as:

- The firm logo
- Brand color
- Type font

The use of these items is a must to convey the relationship between the attorney and the firm. They create a very strong brand consistency and should be used as much as possible to create an immediate recognition of your firm and brand message. But there can and should be flexibility in their use that includes relocating the standard placement of the logo or use of a secondary color.

More flexibility can also be given to components like photo imagery and other graphic elements. These will allow for more personalization of the piece while maintaining consistency across the core brand elements.

Finally, another way to add flexibility to your branding is to create a standard footer on all ads or printed materials that allow for greater personalization across the rest of the collateral.

Adding Flexibility to Your Website

The law firm's website is an integral marketing and branding tool. It also should be flexible enough to allow attorneys and practice areas to promote themselves in a way that makes sense for their particular markets.

Can attorneys post a blog, upload video content or add photos that will market themselves or their practice areas without interfering with the law firm brand's use across the site? If not, this is something that needs to be addressed the next time you go through a website revision.

Using Social Media for Your Personal Brand

If you're looking to promote your personal brand, look no further than social media. Social media is the perfect brand builder for individual attorneys. Lawyers can share blog posts and post other relevant information pertinent to their practice areas.

Not all social channels may fit your personal brand, so enlist your firm's marketing personnel to help you define what channels are the best fit for you. Remember to maintain consistency across all networks by using the same profile picture. In addition, some social channels work best if you post once or twice a week, while others may require more regular attention. And remember to know your firm's guidelines as well as your respective state bar association's rules on social media use. Some actions can be construed as "advertising" and thus are subject to association guidelines.

Law is a professional service. That means that a large part of the decision-making process that

determines whether a client hires you or someone else is how much they connect with you as an individual. The way you shape this identity is by honing your personal brand. So attorneys and law firms need to take their brands seriously and figure out how to strike a balance between the firm's image and that of its individual attorneys.

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