





How to stand out within a sea of sameness

In an increasingly competitive international marketplace, David H. Freeman considers what it takes for law firms to truly differentiate themselves

While differentiation is a process, a solid culture is the defining characteristic of any organisation. And make no mistake, your firm has a culture; whether authored by you or not.

Anthropologist Philip Folsom will tell you that any ‘tribe’ or group collective develops its own working style. Successful tribes/organisations craft a culture based on two components: Vision – succinct and well-articulated – and Values – a core suite of operating principles that establish organisational behaviour. Vision and values are the bedrocks of differentiation.



Joseph Panetta

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They define a company's identity and ultimately, its destiny.

The problem is, most firms operate more by default than by design, with generic vision and values statements that few know or live by. Folsom suggests that the first step in differentiation is to look inward, put a stake in the ground and commit to principles that can truly guide your firm to greatness.

Brand building

Branding expert Joseph Panetta sees law firm differentiation through the lens of having worked with luxury brands and consumer goods for more than two decades. He asks – while you know the name of your top competitors, have you ever truly studied their website, logo, colour and font? Have you read their articles? To the outsider looking at the forest of legal services, they all look the same. If there was ever a need for differentiation, the practice of law screams for it. How to start?

Panetta suggests taking a page from consumer brand marketers, who have mastered the art of differentiation. How

do they make their brands stand out? How do they define why a customer should choose them versus a similar provider? They do so by illustrating the core brand value/delivery upfront – in language, colour, font, positioning, and describing the customer experience/deliverable.

According to Panetta, whether purchasing laundry detergent, a new car or legal services, the same set of questions are inherent in any choice a buyer faces: So what? Who cares? Why you?

So what?

What it is about working with you that is special? Not merely a list of accolades or where you studied, but what is it about the experience of working with you that makes you special, different, unique. (Hint: maybe poll some past or current clients – common themes may emerge).

Who cares?

No one wants to feel like the lone wolf when making the hiring decision – along with a client roster, how about



Philip Folsom

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adding a ‘challenges’ list? Letting your prospects know about challenges you have helped clients overcome to show how deeply you understand them and their business.

Why you?

This is your personal ‘secret sauce’, so don’t say the same thing every firm says – tell them something that is authentic to you. Use an engaging writing style that does not feel like it was cobbled together by committee. Provide specific examples of times you provided above-and-beyond levels of client service. And this is where great bios come in – tell something engaging about your history, your path to becoming the lawyer you are, the passion you have for your practice and great success stories.

Finally, embody these answers in your presence. Illustrate what working with you can be like through your website language; how your firm answers RFPs; collateral material; your reception area; how your staff interacts with clients and prospects; even email signatures. Make your brand reflect the youness of you – not the sameness of everyone else. True

differentiation is not about keeping up with the Jones’, it is about showing how you stand out from them.

Key differentiators

Research has shown that two of the top law firm differentiation techniques are creating industry teams and delivering high levels of client service. The problem is, these differentiators are becoming commonplace, so while they take your group out of the pool of ‘all’ other lawyers, you need to do more to truly stand out.

To that end, how you present yourself may be your real ticket to differentiation. Are you creative in how you tell your story, how you grab their attention? Example: recently a firm answered J. Crew’s RFP by delivering their response in the form a J. Crew styled catalog – complete with photos, images of the team, descriptions. Immediately that says, ‘we get you’. And what do clients want more than anything? To be understood and to feel special.

Exceptional client service

One way to make them feel special is by delivering truly exceptional levels of client

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service. But who defines exceptional? The firm, or the client? I find it interesting that firms believe they do a good job here.

In a survey I conducted with nearly 2,000 lawyers and other law firm professionals in dozens of firms, the highest score they gave themselves was for ‘Our firm delivers exceptional client service’. But that just can’t be true – by definition, every firm can’t be the exception. This means most firms are deluding themselves.

In fact, they need to think more deeply, be more ingenious, and do things that are different than their competitors. From a practical perspective, here are some differentiating actions that can get you noticed by the very clients you wish to attract:

- Conduct (unique) proprietary research, interview/connect with key industry decision-makers, craft an industry-leading white paper positioning yourself as thought leaders and offer presentations at industry events and in-house to targeted prospective clients.
- Hunt as a pack by forming industry teams populated by lawyers in

complementary practice areas and implement a ‘Ubiquity Plan’ that deploys team members everywhere clients and referral sources are gathering/seeking information.

- Create events and other opportunities to connect your clients and prospects with each other for their mutual benefit.
- Collect a list of ‘gifts’ – the free services your lawyers typically offer to their clients and prospects – and publicise them to other firm lawyers so they learn the wide array of cross-services they can offer.
- Ask outsiders to give you a clear-eyed opinion of what they see, and to help you articulate how you wish to be perceived. Then map an action plan to actualise it.

Most lawyers I meet are high-performers – they would not have gotten where they are without being so – but they don’t tell their story in ways that engage and attract. By establishing core operating beliefs and principles, building approaches to live and communicate those values, and adding some creativity, firms can stand out within a sea of sameness. ●