

How to Boost Your Brand

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- Do we have a consistent message that we're promoting?
- Are all our communications on point?

A successful brand can mean the difference between a focused, thriving accounting firm and a rudderless,

languishing one. Build your brand on the distinctive value you offer and promote that promise of value through an integrated marketing campaign. Mind the details and remember that every point you interact with a client — from your billhead to your building — is a branding opportunity and a chance to make a positive impression. Use client

teams to personalize your brand and add value to your client relationships. Further engage your professionals and staff with an internal campaign that cultivates a culture of commitment to the brand and a focus on client service. And throughout all your branding initiatives, make sure your message is delivered regularly and consistently. *AA*

Manage Behaviors, Manage Your Brand

By Gregg Lederman, Brand Integrity Inc.

Does your firm lack strategic direction? Does the path you've set change with the wind based on the hidden agendas of your leaders or market and competitive fluctuations? If so, and you're frustrated enough, it might be time to consider aligning what you say (mission, vision, values) with what you do (delivery of behaviors and experiences) in order to positively influence what others (employees, clients, the market) think. That is, it might be time to define and implement a brand strategy.

To get started, you must first understand the four realities of branding:

1. Your brand is not a part of the business, it is the business. Every employee interaction within your firm impacts the brand. Each one makes it either easier or harder for you to keep and recruit great people and good clients. These interactions directly affect costs of payroll and sales, which dramatically influence cash flow for operations. The most successful, future-looking firms (whether large household names or privately held neighborhood shops) recognize that the brand is the playing field for the game of business.

2. Your brand is about experiences, not logos and taglines. Your brand is a people strategy, rather than a marketing strategy. The purpose of a brand strategy is to influence what people think about



The Philadelphia Chapter of AAM displays toys collected at their Annual Holiday Luncheon. In lieu of an attendance fee, members were asked to bring toys or a cash donation that would be donated to the local Toys for Tots program.

your firm in ways that cause them to take the action your firm is looking for. And the only way to influence what people think is to manage the consistent execution of employee behaviors that will drive client experiences. The experience is the marketing! The fact is that 90 percent of the time, individuals will judge your firm by the experience they or someone they know has with your brand and only 10 percent or less by the marketing messages they've heard.

3. The little things that you do CONSISTENTLY are much more important than the BIG things you say! No one is really listening when you tell them how your firm is the industry leader in "blah, blah, blah." Or that you are experts in delivering "blah, blah," and are known for incredibly high-quality "blah." Even if you think they're listening to your salespeople or advertising message, do you really think they're hearing it? Don't count on it!

Why do firms still waste ridiculous amounts of money on advertising and marketing tactics rather than focusing on the experiences that are most relevant to target clients? Well-planned and executed experiences provide reasons for clients to believe what firms want them to believe about their products/services. The reality is you're better off doing a few things well all of the time than doing a lot of things mediocre some of the time. Consistency is king!

Too often, firms put together taglines, clever messaging, and brand promises to attract clients without preparing employees to deliver on them. These firms are wasting marketing dollars by "Branding for the Neighborhood." They fix up the exterior of their firm (or "house") with a nice paint job, flowers, and a beautiful picket fence so everything looks great, just like their marketing, but they've forgotten about what's inside. And when

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clients come in, their visit isn't what they expected — employees aren't motivated to deliver a great experience; work processes haven't been put in place to drive quality; and systems are lacking to foster consistency.

If you want to get the highest return on your marketing investments, take your promises off your walls, Web site, and ads and put them into employee performance. Start this process by taking the following steps:

- Conduct research to truly understand your target clients and their desired outcomes. This will help you identify how your product or service can solve their problems.
- Use this insight to uncover what actions or experiences your employees can do to deliver meaningful points of difference to your clients.
- Translate these actions and experiences by documenting the behaviors employees must do to bring your brand to life for clients every day on the job.
- Integrate these behaviors into employee systems so that you can attract and hire capable people, effectively onboard and train employees on delivery, and assess employee performance regularly to hold them accountable for actually doing the firm brand.

One of the clients I work with, a professional services firm based in New Jersey, has successfully aligned its brand with employee performance to realize significant results. The leadership team wanted to be sure that all employees were following through on what they

had agreed to do for clients. To do so, leadership translated their firm strategies into specific, “on-brand” behaviors. These behaviors were then integrated into job profiles, setting clear expectations for performance, and reinforced through a strategic recognition program that rewarded people for following through on brand goals. Taking these steps has helped the firm to exceed revenue growth goals, achieve zero percent unwanted turnover, and earn “best place to work” accolades.

4. A brand strategy is the single most important differentiator between a good firm and a great firm. Great firms have people and processes that make them great. For any firm in any industry, this fact remains true: your competition cannot easily replicate your people (human capital) or processes (quality assurance, innovation, client service, etc.). They can (and probably will) copy your marketing message, but they will not be able to consistently deliver the same experiences without your people and processes. Since this is the case, why not focus energy on talent management and process improvement? If you are not managing behaviors and experiences, you are not managing your brand.

Now that you are well-versed in the four realities of branding and have defined your strategy and the people/processes needed to deliver it, you're ready to implement. This is where the rubber hits the road and where many firms fail.

So why do firms fail, time and again, to implement strategies, programs, and initiatives? My answer is simple: *Firms fail in implementing strategies because employees don't buy in.*

An employee in your firm has bought in to your strategy when the three parts

of the buy-in formula (Understanding X Commitment X Taking Action) are in place. If any value is at zero, then buy-in equals zero. Plain and simple. You do not have buy-in unless all three components are achieved.

Buy-in doesn't happen overnight. You need to set realistic expectations for yourself and your firm. High performance firms whose employees consistently deliver the client experience make it a part of critical employee touchpoints. The following are five ideal employee touchpoints for teaching and reinforcing the brand:

- Recruitment and hiring: Conduct investigative interviews using brand-driven hiring questions.
- Onboarding new employees: Customize the onboarding process to inspire and motivate performance success with respect to your firm's branded experience. Design and execute experiences at each onboarding touchpoint to ensure employees are educated, inspired, and motivated to live your brand.
- Client experience training: Train employees on critical skills necessary for delivering consistent, positive experiences.
- Performance assessments/evaluations: Clearly define on-brand behavior expectations for specific job categories and measure/track improvements over time.
- Strategic employee recognition: Recognize employees who live the brand and hit key performance goals/objectives and effectively measure and quantify the impact of the firm brand and strategic goals/objectives.

Make no mistake. It doesn't matter if the economy is booming or if it's a bust or if you have 30 employees or 3,000. You will win more and lose less if your employees stay consistent with delivering the experiences clients value most. And you can do this by clearly defining who you want to be and aligning it with behaviors and experiences employees can do. That's managing the brand. **AA**



About the Author:

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