

Do you judge a book by its cover?

By Andrew Hedley, director, Hedley Consulting



For professional firms too much emphasis on the cover and not enough on the content has heralded the demise of many a branding initiative. Moreover, firms' inability to *walk the talk* of their brand promises has sadly done more than waste oodles of money. It has actively disenfranchised clients and confused the market.

The common or garden lexicon of management-speak has successfully corrupted a number of concepts to the point where the idea in practice bears only a passing resemblance to its theoretical genesis. Professional-service brand strategy falls squarely into this category of the misunderstood and misused.

It is commonplace to hear partners referring to the latest re-brand or bemoaning the quality of the firm's branding. However, on closer investigation it is clear they refer to cosmetic changes of visual identity or brochurewear, advertising or other promotional techniques, or the creation of a new letterhead. Few of them have a deeper understanding of brand and its potential impact on strategic direction and client relationships.

Crucially, one should visualise a professional-service brand as the totality of the client's experience with the firm. Taking a holistic view makes it immediately apparent that a large number of touch-points between the firm and its various audiences must be managed if a strong brand is to be built.

Central to successful brand strategy is a consistent client experience – that the firm will set out a promise of 'what you see is what you get, every time you work with us' and align itself to deliver on it. It is also fundamental that the brand experience will be one that is both valued by the client and different (in a meaningful way) from the competition.

The process of developing a brand has the same principal components as any strategic review – understanding the here and now from a number of different perspectives; considering future scenarios and their impact on the business; choosing a preferred route; understanding how to engage the whole firm in a change programme; and crafting an implementation plan. Of course, actually making the plan work in practice is the only true measure of success!

The first couple of hurdles will claim a few victims on the journey to a successful brand. Understanding where you are today is fundamental to the creation of a robust vision of where you might aspire to be tomorrow. Also key is the development of

a realistic picture of how the world might look in a few years and what this might mean for the firm.

Professionals generally enjoy the next stage of the process – the creation of a vision and strategy. It is crucial to create stretching yet realistic objectives. Aspirational yes, but grounded in realism, as strategies that cannot be implemented are not strategies at all – rather they are fairy stories!

It is the operational phase, however, which holds the key to success for any brand strategy. How realistic is the firm being in setting targets that require far-reaching changes to working practices and cultures? How determined is the management team to see through the hard-yards of change? How will these changes be effected?

Providing a consistent client experience is anathema for many professionals – and a huge challenge for those tasked with the management and development of professional-service firms.

Finally, there is the communication phase – going out and telling the world; producing visual identities that align strongly with the vision and altering the physical components that define how the firm presents itself. This is an area firms focus much time, but – in truth – it is not the essence of brand strategy.

In the journey *research-vision-strategy-operations-communications*, by far the most challenging aspect is the firm's ability to ensure the brand promise is backed up by effective operational delivery. Sadly, this is inevitably the stage at which many firms fail.

The vision and strategy may be compelling, but they are no more than fantasy if the firm cannot deliver the reality on the ground.

The communications plan may position the firm brilliantly and create superb awareness and expectation, but if there is a disconnect between the promise and the experience, the only logical result is clients that are at best left confused – at worst, feel misled.

If you want to build a successful brand, make sure your book's cover and content tell the same story. ■

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