

The Key to Credible International Branding

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Virtually all law firm web sites trumpet unparalleled legal work, legendary service, a zealous commitment to cost-effectiveness, and access to creative, collaborative, and highly ethical lawyers. Moreover, they imply a caliber of legal product and a service experience vastly superior to that which other law firms can provide. Since those claims are mirrored by those of their competitors, it is no wonder that clients and recruits are increasingly critical of a universe of seemingly fungible law firms.

If quality, service, and price traditionally have defined legal marketing's thematic trinity, a new claim has emerged in the last decades—the concept of the global law firm—that is, a firm that promises both sophistication and experience in supporting cross-border deals, interpreting the effects of local and international regulation, and resolving disputes in one or many of its myriad locations.

Perhaps no claim is more frequently cited these days than a law firm's "international" cred, and none has been less convincingly substantiated. Let's look, for a moment, at the process by which in-house counsel or business professionals with the authority to hire outside counsel identify potential law firms or lawyers. Most start with the referral process—that is, they seek advice from respected colleagues. In situations where they need more information or want to vet or supplement what they have learned, they likely peruse law firms' web sites or consult one of the few rating services or directories whose methodologies they trust (e.g., *Chambers*).

Armed with a sense of which firms might provide the right combination of expertise, experience, and value, legal service buyers next must select among a smaller list of firms making similar claims. And this is where clients increasingly argue that law firm web sites, advertising, and other external communication materials not only fail to differentiate among service providers, but also suggest a significant and systemic disconnect between what they want and what firms trumpet.

Authentic and Aspirational

Realistically, an effective law firm brand must be simultaneously authentic and aspirational. It must convey the firm's practice, footprint, and culture in ways that are verifiable by clients, prospects, recruits, and the media, among other interested audiences. As importantly, it must feel authentic to firm members and employees. Practically, in an age of unrelenting consolidation, legal brands must evidence sufficient elasticity to allow for firm growth and a perpetually evolving strategy. Indeed, narrow brand platforms that must be rearticulated following every significant growth event inevitably create confusion in the legal marketplace.

However, a quick perusal of the Global 50 or of the Am Law 100 reveals a cadre of large, multi-practice firms with footprints that stretch around the globe and principal brand messaging emphasizing their international status. Firms like to define their reach by their clients' markets, which means that virtually every law firm in our evolving economy can make a legitimate claim to being international. But it is one thing to say that one advises businesses with expanding international interests and another altogether to suggest that a global practice is a firm's hallmark or trump suit.

In a globalizing economy, it is no surprise that law firms strive to be seen as international. As an increasing number of deals, disputes, and regulatory challenges cross borders, beleaguered in-house legal departments are forced to manage dispersed legal activities with inadequate resources and, as a response, they turn to outside counsel for both specialized expertise and global reach. But the important question that law firms must address (and I would posit to date have not addressed effectively) is whether they appreciate what clients understand the promise—the value proposition—of an international law firm actually should be.

Overemphasis on Size and Scope

Study electronic and printed law firm marketing from large multinational law firms and “international” often equates to the display of an impressive physical plant and expanding lawyer workforce. Indeed, a casual perusal of large “international” law firm web sites reveals thousands of lawyers and a footprint with dozens of offices on multiple continents. In other words, the proof points for claiming to be “international” relate primarily to size and scope.

I would submit that when clients and prospects (and, indeed, even recruits) survey the brands of self-designated international law firms, they conclude that law firms mean something entirely different than they do about what it means to be an effective global law firm. A better answer—and one more closely aligned with client concerns—well might focus on the execution of a philosophical commitment to collaboration.

When a client hires outside counsel to assist it with a matter in another jurisdiction (read for jurisdiction: city, state, or country), it is looking for a firm that appreciates the nuances of bringing together a team of

highly experienced local practitioners and maximizing the contribution that they make individually and collectively. Whether the firm has a office and lawyers on the ground in one or more of the places where the client's work requires expertise and attention, or whether it commits to finding proxies for its own lawyers among members of a global network or among an affiliation of independently identified firms, the focus should not be simply on being everywhere, but on working strategically and compatibly with culturally diverse lawyers who understand and appreciate the clients' issues and concerns in its many geographies. That focus must relate both to substance and service delivery.

This shift in frame of reference away from number—whether it be numbers of offices or head count—to a manner of practicing requires law firms to accept that what clients want, what they are buying, is comfort with both the way that the firm practices and its promise that it will accept responsibility for orchestrating appropriate local counsel, expertise, and execution on the client's behalf. A significant part of that implied promise is not just that the firm will acquire capability it lacks—whether that is expertise at appropriate levels of sophistication greater than its own lawyers can provide or in areas where it has no extant practice—but that its own lawyers universally subscribe to consistent practice and service standards.

Demonstrating the Brand's Validity

Many clients have experienced unevenness in the quality of the work product or in the service delivery and communication standards of lawyers in their outside firms' other offices, and that experience has led to the widespread suspicion that large, multi-office, multi-practice firms more closely resemble franchises than integrated entities. What many clients believe they are acquiring when they pay the fees of a global law firm is the firm's lawyers' ability to address issues across geographies and, therefore, provide the client with a better response. So a law firm sensitive to that historical concern might distinguish itself by focusing its messaging on the way in which it both has sustained the experiential and substantive integrity and local focus of its lawyers in every market while inculcating a commitment to client service and satisfaction that transcends the idiosyncrasies of individual lawyers or cultures.

The trick to branding that confirms this message platform is demonstration, not claim. And in an age in which electronic communication better serves the needs of both sender and recipient, the medium well might be web sites or e-alerts as opposed to conventional brochures (although targeted advertising might be an effective tie-in with such a campaign.) A global law firm needs a section for case studies that illustrate its capacity to work across borders in ways that advantage its clients. Those brief descriptions of a problem solved or an opportunity realized for a client must describe not only the "what" of the matter, but the "how." Featuring a current one on the site's home page, with links to a compendium of other case studies featuring initiatives that underscore the firm's seamless communication and collaboration across borders

would suggest that this is more than rhetoric—it is a legitimate spotlight on a key client priority that differentiates the firm from its competitors.

When law firms demonstrate an appreciation that global is about making the world accessible, manageable, and even predictable, in the best of ways, their primary marketing messaging will supplant or enhance the precedent-sanctioned claims of quality, responsiveness, and value—and now of international focus. What will emerge will be a new focus on the integrity of the firm’s vision and execution and how a demonstrable philosophy of practice can yield true benefits for clients as well as a platform of irresistible caliber for recruits. To market in a manner more compelling than that which we have seen to date from firms positioning themselves as international would be to tell real stories that demonstrate to clients and other audiences that the firm has achieved the grail of cross-border alignment—not simply to claim that the firm exists in Abu Dhabi, Tokyo, and Rio de Janeiro as well as in New York and London.