

How Do You Make A Law Firm Interesting?

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Law firms get a lot of play on television, where they are always portrayed as interesting – at least when it comes to their members’ peccadilloes. But as an attorney or someone who works closely with attorneys, you know that no courtroom drama depicts the way it is in real life. So your initial response to my opening question was likely along the lines of “my firm is already interesting” or “why do I need to make my firm interesting” or, if I’m lucky, “how on earth can I make my firm interesting.”

All of these responses are fair enough and I’ll address each of them if you’ll stick with me until the conclusion of the piece.

The first thing to consider is this: we’ve moved past the days when advertising and marketing were verboten for professional firms. Now these firms – including yours – scramble for business just like everyone else and face a serious challenge in getting prospects’ attention. To do this, you really need to distinguish yourself in the marketplace. An easy – and nevertheless compelling – place to start is by making your firm interesting. Chances are good that the firms you most often compete with have not done it or cannot do it. Chances are even better that they will not do it. This spells opportunity for you.

Why Law Firms Are Not Interesting

Why did the concept of making a law firm interesting seem so irrelevant – or even ridiculous – at first glance?

We already have a preconceived notion of who attorneys are and what they are like. By and large, that notion precludes them from being interesting – at least in a positive way.

Move past the perceived inherent stiffness of attorneys. Is there anything – aside from detailed knowledge of the law – that most people think they don’t know about attorneys? Probably not. This leads us to the second challenge of making a law firm interesting:

We typically are not interested in what we think we already know.

Now let’s look at what lawyers do. Most of us would say they prepare contracts for us, represent us in court and advise us on what we should – and should not – say or do. How interesting is that? Not very. Although all of these things – and the myriad of other matters attorneys help us with – are essential, we don’t typically assign a high value to them. We view what attorneys do as transactional, rather than relational, inspirational or transformational. Each contract written, each matter handled is a commodity that could readily be purchased anywhere.

Businesses that are based on transactions or commodities are not interesting unless the transaction goes wrong or the commodity is not available.

Finally, let’s examine a closely related issue: image. The simplest way to do this is to close your eyes and think of attorneys and the law. What comes up for you? Most people would see stacks of documents, row upon row of books that look exactly the same and quiet spaces furnished in a bygone style. Others may see images related to a court or even a hefty bill. Interesting? I don’t think so and probably neither do you, even if you inhabit one of those spaces and need those books to do your job.

If the visual images that we conjure up when thinking of a business are not interesting to us, the business itself is unlikely to be interesting.



In fairness, we can replay these exercises with many other service professions, from accountants to engineers. Although our precise perceptions will change, they still tend to have four things in common:

- We already think we know what people in the profession are like.
- We already think we know everything we need to know about the profession itself.
- We perceive what the professions do as transactional, providing a defined service for a specific, limited time.
- We have a hard time conjuring up images related to the profession that intrigue us – or make us feel anything good at all.

In short, it's quite difficult to make many professions interesting. And if it's difficult to make your profession interesting, it's going to be equally difficult to make your professional firm interesting.

It's tough to distinguish one firm from another in the same profession.

Why You're Not As Distinctive As You Think You Are

At this point, you may well be arguing that the attorneys in your firm are smarter than those in the firm down the street. Or that they have more prestigious degrees. Or that they're better at certain things. All of this may be true, but is it really going to distinguish you in the eyes of your clients and those you want as clients?

The first assertion is hard to prove, so it's not going to do anything for you at all. The second may matter to alumni of the same schools as your attorneys, but won't count for anything as attorneys develop work experience that overshadows their initial professional training. While we're at it, clients do not care how active you were in the law review; it simply does not mean anything to them.

You might get some mileage from the third assertion – if you can get enough buzz going. Bear in mind, though, that this will cut two ways: people expect to pay more for what they perceive to be the best, but most of us don't want to pay for the best every time. Paradoxically, then, you'll still have the problem of being perceived in a transactional way; however, the best path for you – and for your clients – is for you to be perceived in a more *relational* way.

You could go on to argue that you work harder than the other guys or that you provide better client service. Guess what? The competition is saying exactly the same thing.

The things that you think set you apart probably won't resonate with clients.

Distinguishing the "Undistinguishable"

The picture I've painted for you so far looks pretty bleak, doesn't it? And you didn't really want to do this marketing stuff anyway; after all, it's not what you went into the legal profession to do. Hang with me for another page or so and I'll show you some things you can do to set your firm apart.

The First Step: Change the Conversation

The very first thing to do is to get your clients and prospects to start thinking about what you do in a different way. It's not as hard as you might think and it can even be fun.

1. **Look at elementary branding.** Would a logo gain you some positive attention? Could a tagline capture something both powerful and true about what your firm does for its clients? An example of how this can work is "your most trusted business advisor," which we helped a CPA firm develop. These things can deeply impact the way people view your business.

2. **Inform your current client base.** A family law attorney told me about a client who came to her for a will update after a period of years. During the course of conversation, the attorney realized that the client had used another attorney several times in the intervening years. The client simply had no idea that my contact could have helped her, so she went elsewhere. Look for simple, straightforward ways to let your clients know about everything you can help them with. This will start to move you into a more relational, less transactional basis with your clients.
3. **Identify what you're really selling – and why clients value it.** Like it or not, your firm is a business and that means that you sell something. What you're selling goes far beyond the billable hour; in fact, the billable hour has virtually no value to any client. The transactional things you do – contracts, court representation, etc. – also have little value in and of themselves. What's the real end goal of your service – and what do your services honestly do for clients? If you're not sure, ask.

The Second Step: Shape a New Image

After you've figured out the type and breadth of conversation you really want to be having – and how it might resonate with clients, you'll want to put that new conversation out there and invite people to participate in it. Yep, that means I want you to do some marketing.

Before you get completely disgusted with me, let me offer up the first piece of advice I give to all of my clients:

Marketing is an invitation to conversation.

That's all it is – not more and not less. Seen that way, I hope the notion of marketing is not quite so unpalatable. Following the inductive path, you might suspect that the next thing I'm going to tell you that selling is simply the conversation. If so, you would be correct, although that's not what this piece is about.

How do you make an invitation to conversation? There are any number of different ways, including typical marketing tools. Print collateral – such as brochures – and a sharp web site can do a lot of the heavy lifting. Your firm may already have a brochure, but I doubt that it's the kind of piece I'm talking about. Take a look at it: it's probably a catalog of your firm's achievements and the various specialties you offer. Is that interesting? Not to me, probably not to your clients and perhaps not even to you.

The morning I finished this piece, I had breakfast with an attorney in an old Manhattan law firm – a guy who is very comfortable with the business-building aspects of his work – who told me he seldom gives out the brochure because he does not think it helps him make his case.

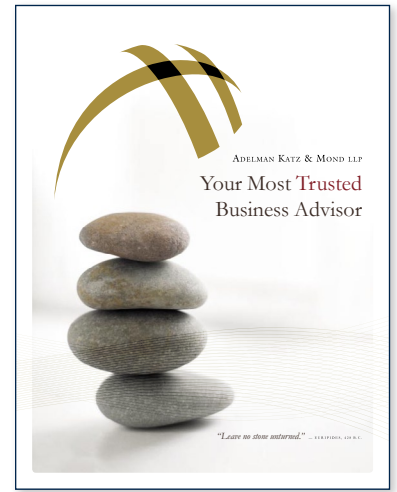
The sort of brochure I'd like you to consider will help you make your case because it encompasses the new conversation you created in Step 1; it:

- Features whatever branding you have developed.
- Talks about what you're really doing for your clients (without making promises that could get you in ethical trouble).
- Espouses a point of view about your firm's work (or several points of view if you want to involve all your partners).
- Starts to show – not tell – people what the experience of doing business with you would be like.

Above all, it is physically different from any other law firm brochure you – or your prospects – have ever seen. The language is warm and engaging, the images are provocative.

At right is the cover of a brochure I helped an accounting firm create; it should give you a better idea of what I mean. It's different – and it's interesting. (If you want to know more about this piece and how it came to be, ask me for a copy of my article [How Do You Make an Accounting Firm Interesting?](#))

At this point in time it should go without saying that you need a good web site, but some firms are still resistant or they have sites that mirror their (uninteresting) brochures. What a lost opportunity!



The Third Step: Flaunt It

After you take all the time – those potentially billable hours – to reinvent the conversation about what you do and present it in the form of interesting conversation-starters, what do you do?

Tell everyone you can. Hand out copies of your brochure wherever you go. Be just as proud of what you have done as if you had won an important case or saved your client thousands (or however you measure success in your particular practice). This new venture you will have undertaken will help you get to more of the successes you – and your clients – value.

Some other intriguing things will happen. People – even those who have known and worked with you for a long time – will start to look at you differently. Even more importantly, you and other key players at your firm will look at yourselves differently. You will find that you have a new excitement about your work and that you will feel less awkward about discussing it in a “selling” context.

Then you will have that rare and valuable thing: an interesting law firm.



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