

THOUGHT LEADER PROFILE

MARCH 2008



NORM RUBENSTEIN,
Principal, Zeughauser
Group

This is the third installment in a monthly series profiling “thought leaders” in the field of legal marketing and client development. Each installment will feature the thoughts of a different expert in legal marketing on a topic that they see as a critical concern. This month’s profile features Norm Rubenstein, a principal in the national consulting firm Zeughauser Group and a Legal Marketing Association (“LMA”) Hall of Fame award recipient. Profiles are created and produced by the LMA Resources Committee thought leaders Catherine Alman MacDonagh and John Cunningham.

Creating a Powerful Brand

BY JOHN O. CUNNINGHAM

In an era of intense competition, many law firms are dramatically stepping up their efforts at reaching out to the most desirable prospective clients. Now the challenge each law firm faces is one of standing out among the throng of suitors beckoning for the work those clients provide.

“In order to make an impression, a law firm needs memorable and authentic messaging that will differentiate it from other firms,” says Norm Rubenstein, a principal at the Zeughauser Group and former CMO for Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe. “The problem is that decision-makers [for corporate clients] say it is difficult to distinguish among outside counsel because the messages and icons all seem fungible to them,” he adds.

He advises firms to avoid the iconography of pillars, globes and courthouses that service purchasers say are overused. “Firms have a hard time developing unique messages too,” says Rubenstein, noting that most law firm messaging relates to a cluster of concepts involving: quality and value; service and responsiveness; global reach and one-stop shopping. “Firms that are capturing mind-share are coupling a positioning platform that aligns client priorities with unique and memorable presentations,” he asserts.

“To take a quantum leap from the crowd, you must describe what your firm can do in language and imagery that is integrated with your overall marketing platform,” says Rubenstein, pointing for example to the “O-shaped imagery” used by Orrick in their marketing campaigns. The latest version features a distinctive O-shaped life preserver floating with the phrase “when you need to save the company.”

Rubenstein also gives high marks to Kirkpatrick & Lockhart (now K&L/Gates) for their original series of ads tied to the pithy slogan “Challenge Us.” He says the firm took its slogan seriously, adding that research has demonstrated that clients clearly want lawyers who rise to any challenge.

In order to execute a winning campaign, says Rubenstein, firms must follow some basic guidelines:

- Don’t go to market with inappropriate claims;
- Take a position that is not owned by the competition; and
- Communicate your message in creative and memorable ways.

Rubenstein also cautions law firms that “you must live your brand so that the customer experience confirms your positioning strategy and messaging.” He asserts that “a service experience aligned with your messaging will result in loyal clients” but warns that “an inauthentic message will be the kiss of death.” That is a big reason that he recommends that firms focus not just on internal research of what makes them special, but external study that frames this picture against the backdrop of competition.

He adds that law firms must insure that their media relations, advertising, business development and branding functions work together as a team, likening their work to that of the best set designers in a theater context. “If everyone works together on the messaging and imagery, it will create a relationship with the audience. The backdrop is not the product the audience pays to see, but it can create excitement and fast-forward their understanding of what is to come and what to expect,” Rubenstein concludes.

Ingredients for a Successful Branding Campaign

Norm Rubenstein suggests that marketers can improve the success of a branding campaign by taking the following steps:

- Get a respected person in the firm to own and drive the initiative with top-down leadership;
- Define your market position and execute your program based on research done on yourself and the competition;
- Invest aggressively in high-caliber creative execution to stand out in a cluttered marketplace;
- Integrate and align your business development strategy, messaging and service execution; and
- Stay the course—apply your strategy long enough to make an impact and avoid revolving-door messaging that makes you look like “the flavor of the day.”



JOHN O. CUNNINGHAM is a consultant, freelance writer and contributor to various legal and business publications. He practiced law for 16 years and served as general counsel for both Pizzeria UNO and Chief Auto Parts (later merged into “AutoZone”). Comments and inquiries may be sent to him at C3cunningham@aol.com.

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