

THE 7 BIGGEST BRANDING BLUNDERS

AND HOW YOUR PROFESSIONAL SERVICES FIRM CAN AVOID THEM

A WHITE PAPER FROM HINGE

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Your brand, if properly understood and carefully managed, is probably the most valuable asset of your professional services firm and is the key to accelerating growth and profitability. Yet branding a professional services firm is often misunderstood and mismanaged.

The goal of this white paper is to help you recognize some of the most common branding blunders in your own marketing program. Ignore these mistakes at your own risk. Fixing them can have a dramatic impact on your

firm's market awareness, business development success and bottom line.

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Our recommendations come directly from our four major research studies of professional services firms, in which we interviewed hundreds of CEOs, top marketing executives and buyers of professional services. (See the Resources section at the end of this paper for details.) If you are considering rebranding your firm in the future, read these blunders as a cautionary tale – and a prescription for a healthier, more valuable brand.



1. YOUR LOGO IS NOT YOUR BRAND

The modern term “brand” has never been entirely corralled and tamed. With its historical roots in ranching, the word evokes an identifying mark burned into the hide of cattle. Even today, some executives like to think of their logo and company name as their brand – a visual identifier that protects their investment from the market’s rustlers and cheats. But that protection is already described by the word “trademark.” In marketing, however, the term “brand” is more than skin deep.

Pick up five marketing books at your local bookstore and you’ll find five different definitions for the word “brand.” Varied as they are, most of these definitions will agree on at least one thing: a brand’s strength depends on how a company is perceived in the marketplace. So with that fact in mind, here’s a practical way to think about your professional services brand:

$$\text{Brand Strength} = \text{Reputation} \times \text{Visibility}$$

If your firm has both a strong reputation and high market visibility, it probably has a strong brand. If one or both of these attributes are weak, your brand will suffer.

There are an abundance of elements that can affect your brand’s success (your logo is just one), and each contributes incrementally to your reputation or visibility. These elements might include your tagline, website, messaging, customer referrals, community involvement, and specialization, to name just a few. In fact, branding is so powerful – and difficult to master – because it can evolve so many ways.

What you can do: Think of your brand as the way your audience sees, talks about and experiences your firm. These perceptions are influenced by a wide variety of factors, not all of which are firmly in your control. But you can shape your brand by carefully considering your audience and crafting every piece of your marketing program to engage them and speak to their needs. The watchwords here are consistency and congruence with your overall business strategy.

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2. YOUR BRAND IS NOT TRUE

Your firm really has two brands: an internal brand and an external brand. You may have strong feelings about what your brand should be, and you might be very good at articulating your vision to others. That’s your internal brand.

But if what you say doesn’t match people’s real-world experience with your firm (your external brand), then you’ve got a big brand problem on your hands. Put another way, if you can’t deliver on your brand promise, you don’t have much of a brand.



This problem is not unusual, in part because people are not very well equipped to evaluate themselves objectively. It's easy to confuse the firm you really are with the firm you want to be. Clients and prospects, on the other hand, have a talent for sniffing out overstated ambitions and half-truths.

What you can do: Get an objective view of your brand. The best way to do this is to engage a neutral third party to interview your external audiences (clients, lost clients, prospects). You'll find strengths you didn't know you had, as well as hidden weaknesses. Based on what you learn, you can choose to make changes to your business or adjust your marketing approach.

3. YOU SELL YOURSELF SHORT

Selling yourself short is the flipside of overpromising. If you fail to recognize your firm's major strengths, you are unlikely to promote them effectively or use them to differentiate your firm from competitors. Firms that leverage their strengths are able to grow more quickly than those that try to compete on qualities where they are just average. They simply have more powerful hooks to catch new clients that appreciate their specific capabilities.

Firms that leverage their strengths are able to grow more quickly.

Here's an example: A national architecture firm was great at collaborating with clients. They had never emphasized this characteristic, however, because they failed to recognize its importance. Not until they conducted research on their clients did they learn that collaboration was one of their most admired traits. The firm went on to make collaboration a centerpiece of their brand, and they were able to capture new clients who appreciate it.

What you can do: Once you understand how your clients perceive your strength, see what you can do to push the aspirational limits of those strengths in your brand. Of course, be careful not to cross the line and misrepresent your abilities.

4. ANTIQUE IDENTITY

Many firms start their business with a hastily conceived identity and a temporary website. On the strength of their personal connections and hard work, many of these firms experience success for a few years – so focusing on their brand is not a priority. But eventually their image begins to feel dated, giving the impression that the firm is behind the times, small and less capable than competitors. Their website, because it is difficult to update, often features stale news, inaccurate services and messaging that misses the mark.

If this sounds familiar, your brand is stretched to its limits. Referrals become problematic when a firm's word-of-mouth reputation is not supported by its website and visual brand. Prospects begin to have doubts. And referring clients have to explain away your unsophisticated look. Sadly, many firms fail to realize the impact this is having on their success.



What you can do: Most successful firms refresh their website and collateral every 3-5 years and review their identity every 5-10 years. Expensive? Not really, if you factor in the value of being able to target and engage your audience over many years. If you build your website on a content management system, you can easily keep it fresh-feeling and relevant. And when it's time for a website redesign, today's XHTML and CSS standards separate your content from the site's layout, making it much simpler to transfer your text to the new site in the future.

5. ME-TOO MARKETING

Some professional services CEOs are content to emulate those firms in their industry that they most admire: "If it's good enough for X, it's good enough for us." So they set out to copy a competitor's services, their look and even the way they talk about themselves. What these CEOs don't realize is that this sort of me-too approach comes with hidden perils. In fact, it's one of the riskiest ways to go to market.

When you copy another firm, you entirely lose the context in which it's brand was built. What works for one audience won't necessarily resonate with another. Your brand should be designed to specifically address your clients' wants and needs and your firm's best characteristics and priorities.

What you can do: Take differentiation seriously – the nation's fastest growing professional services firms do. The more you can stand out from similar firms in your market the more likely you will be noticed and remembered. But be sure you choose to differentiate your firm with an attribute or service that matters to your target client. To be effective, your differentiator must set you off from your competition – so "the quality of our people," "great customer service" or "our technical expertise" just won't cut it.

6. JAMMED UP WITH JARGON

Have you ever visited a website and been unable to understand what the company does? Have you been turned off by a site's excessive technical jargon or vague language? Unfortunately, this verbal muddiness is all too common in the professional services. And it's a guaranteed brand killer.

Many firms become so caught up in the details of what they do that they fail to communicate their true benefits. In their eagerness to demonstrate expertise (by spewing technical jargon), they lose the less-technically-inclined portion of their audience.

Other firms use vague jargon-laced language to avoid being pegged as something specific. These firms fear that if they stand for something, they will miss out on a lot of opportunities. They use buzz words to camouflage their true identity.

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If your firm uses either of these tactics, beware: "If you confuse 'em, you'll lose 'em." You can't afford to be unclear. Most people won't tell you that they don't understand what you do; they will simply move on to another firm.



What you can do: Clear communication – whether written or spoken – is a hallmark of an effective brand. It indicates that you know your audience and their needs. To ensure you are communicating effectively, run your copy and elevator speech by a few clients or a marketing consultant. Make clarity a priority. If you are struggling to get your message right, consider hiring an expert to help you draft a new approach.

7. CHASING THE WRONG STRATEGY

Getting your strategy wrong is perhaps the biggest blunder of all. When your strategy doesn't align with your brand, efficiency goes out the window. For example, if a firm always competes on price but their brand touts their quality, what is a prospect to think? Because low prices are not associated with high quality, the customer becomes confused and suspicious.

Sometimes, however, a firm's brand and strategy are in perfect alignment, but the strategy is all wrong. The firm suffers because its fundamental marketing assumptions are flawed. A firm that targets a highly specialized audience, for instance, may find itself stymied when it realizes that the market isn't large enough to sustain long-term growth. Or conversely, a firm that avoids specialization altogether may find it difficult to compete against more focused competitors; it can have trouble building awareness and winning contracts.

What you can do: In a recent research study, Hinge uncovered a group of firms that grew nine times faster than average and were 50 percent more profitable, yet they spent less than average on marketing and sales. These firms invest in getting their strategy right. How do they do that? Most of these high growth, high value firms conduct regular research into their target audiences and use these insights to inform their market strategy. Then they build their brand around that strategy.

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Any firm can use research to improve their brand's effectiveness. Hire an impartial third party to conduct phone interviews with your clients at least two, and preferably four, times per year. Use this information to learn what your target audience wants and needs, likes and dislikes, aspires to and fears. Then refine your service offerings and craft a highly relevant message. If you can apply your strategy across all aspects of your brand, people – the ones you want to reach – will begin to take notice.

LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

Some of the best learning opportunities come from the mistakes we make. Use these lessons to learn from the miscues of others before you blunder into them yourself. If your firm has already taken some wrong turns, take the time now to change course and head for a more fruitful, rewarding destination.



RESOURCES

Hinge has written a great deal on branding and marketing professional services firms. All of this materials is available on our website. Just go to www.hingemarketing.com and click on Library. Some of the materials we've made available to you include:

- > 5 research studies on various aspects of professional services marketing
- > Articles and white papers
- > Podcasts
- > A professional services marketing blog

Also be sure to check out our new ebook, *Spiraling Up: How to Create a High Growth, High Value Professional Services Firm*. Download your free copy at www.spiralingupbook.com.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Lee is Managing Partner at Hinge. With a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, Lee is a former researcher and tenured professor at Virginia Tech. He left academia to start up and run three high-growth companies, including an \$80 million runaway success story. Lee has worked with many global brands, including Anheuser Busch, American Express, Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines, Time Life, Capital One, monster.com and Yahoo! Lee writes and lectures frequently on brand marketing and management.



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A partner and co-founder of Hinge, Aaron has conceived and overseen engaging brand strategies for dozens of professional services firms. He has authored articles on branding for the Washington Business Journal and numerous service industry publications.

ABOUT HINGE

Hinge is a branding and marketing firm specializing in professional services companies. They help professional services firms grow faster and maximize value. Their comprehensive offerings include research and strategy, brand development, award-winning creative and marketing outsourcing.

For free information about growing your professional service firm or to learn how Hinge may be help to you, contact us at www.hingemarketing.com or 703-391-8870.

