

Branding helps make your firm's mark

by Rosland B. Gammon
September 22, 2008

Gerald O'Brien, senior partner and managing partner at Anderson, O'Brien, Skrenes & Golla in Stevens Point, says the firm is considering branding. He's not sure what it'll entail for the 15-lawyer firm, but his marketing firm says it's something they should do.

"I don't know if size has anything to do with it," O'Brien said. "We're relying upon marketing people and what they're seeing in publications."

Increased competition caused by consolidation and growth among law firms has more firms thinking about branding to define what they do and who they serve as a way of setting themselves apart.

"In Wisconsin, with large national firms and consolidation, we see more competition for local business," said Carl Mueller, president and owner of Mueller Communications in Milwaukee. "It has forced local firms to be more aggressive."

Branding is about having a consistent message for potential clients, said Pam Bertieri, head of marketing for Gonzalez Saggio and Harlan LLP in Milwaukee.

"You want people to recognize which firm the information is coming from," she said.

Gonzalez Saggio's marketing department has grown from two people two years ago to eight, while the number of attorneys has grown from 40 to 77, she said. Branding is important to maintain a consistent message at the nine offices nationwide.



Branding 101

Tips for getting started include:

- Determine the focus area you want to target.
- Develop a theme to make composing a tagline and logo easier.
- Choose clients that will reinforce the brand image.
- Be sure to add the new brand to all of your promotional materials.

“We don’t do a lot of advertising,” Bertieri said. “Branding tells the story of the firm and how it started.”

Depending on the market, Gonzalez Saggio, which represents Midwest Airlines and Harley Davidson among others, alternates between two taglines “Representation of leaders by leaders” and “Driven by excellence. Powered by Diversity” to emphasize the firm’s ranking as the second largest minority-owned firm in the nation, she said.

But not all law firms have moved toward branding.

Tracy DePriest, office administrator at Petrie & Stocking in Milwaukee, has been pushing branding as an option since she joined the 114-year-old firm in January.

“It’s a different world now than then,” DePriest said. “There are a lot more lawyers and you have to set yourselves apart.”

The firm uses the tagline “Law firm for a lifetime,” but she wants to expand beyond that.

Part of her challenge, she said, is convincing members of the firm of the benefits.

“You have to change attitudes,” she said.

Some law firms see branding as a costly expense, but it doesn’t have to be, Bertieri said.

Branding can be as simple as creating a logo for pens or letterhead.

“Small to midsized firms can pull it off,” Bertieri said.

With a decline in TV and newspaper advertising, smaller firms have more opportunities to reach their target audiences with the Internet, Mueller said.

Like larger firms, the first step has to be defining what makes the firm special, be it the practice areas or history.

“The cardinal rule in marketing or branding: define what makes you different. Specify what you do. Don’t make it sound like everybody else’s,” Mueller said.

John Lamberto, senior client development consultant for FindLaw, said firms also have to retrain their brain to understand branding is about helping potential clients find them.

They have to ask two questions: “What does the client need?” and “What is the benefit to the client?” While Lamberto said he’s known firms whose branding campaigns involved redecorating the office and changing the lawyers’ attire from boring suits to black mock turtlenecks, firms don’t have to be so elaborate.

If seeking help, Mueller advises that firms that want a smaller approach avoid hiring an ad firm that does TV ads, but instead go to marketing professional or someone in the public relations field with an integrated approach.

“You have to have a marketing message that will jump out and be easily memorable,” Lamberto said. “If you have a marketing message that stands out, people will remember long after they’ve forgotten your name.”