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Marketing Your Design Firm: How to brand yourselves as well as you brand your clients

By Adam Lerner



Take a moment and contemplate this question: Does your firm use the same brand development services it sells?

If all firms did so, the design consulting industry would be populated with branded firms positioned around their own unique attributes. Instead, the current state is an industry with largely undifferentiated firms positioned around the same attribute: "innovation." Why is it that the very brand services we tell clients are indispensable receive little-to-no financial or human resources inside our own firms? Are we all the shoemaker's children?

Let's clear up the first lingering misconception: sales and marketing are not the same, and do not require a similar skill set.

Perhaps one reason why more resources are not committed to branding our firms is the lack of understanding for who marketers are, and what they do. So let's clear up the first lingering misconception: sales and marketing are not the same, and do not require a similar skill set. Both

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are essential to design firms, but they have distinctive roles. Sales is responsible for turning a warm lead (someone that has been qualified) into a client and managing the relationship to ensure future business. Marketing is responsible for activities involved in generating warm leads and communicating the firm's value proposition to the marketplace.

Marketers working for design firms should wear two hats: internal and external. The internal marketer is responsible for strategically positioning the design firm's own brand in the memory of the target market through marketing communications. The external marketer provides brand strategies to the firm's clients through market research. Currently such roles are often unfulfilled--or filled by industrial designers--a situation which could be markedly improved by hiring marketing specialists.

The focus of this article is on the shoemaker: marketing aimed at increasing the brand awareness of the design firm itself--not its clients.

You must resist the temptation to position your firm's brand as a collection of capabilities. Capabilities in industrial design, engineering, and research can be easily added and subtracted by competitors within a short period of time. This makes a capabilities-based brand strategy unsustainable, and potentially ineffective in differentiating any firm from its competition. Your firm's capabilities should support your brand, but not become it.

Marketing Methodologies

Whether marketing a service or a product, the same basic methodologies apply: Your firm's value proposition must articulate the underlying needs of the market, and highlight the benefits of choosing your firm over its competitors. There is a methodology to this. The cumulative marketing efforts should transition a customer through the following steps: grab attention, sway perceptions, create positive affect (emotion) and generate cognition. You then keep the firm top-of-mind with the target market through frequent touch points.

Live by this code: attention + frequency = memory.

You must resist the temptation to position your firm's brand as a collection of capabilities. Capabilities in industrial design, engineering, and research can be easily added and subtracted by competitors within a short period of time. This makes a capabilities-based brand strategy unsustainable, and potentially ineffective in differentiating any firm from its competition. Your firm's capabilities should support your brand, but not become it.



Take for example the positioning of FedEx, a service company that uses the slogan "The World On Time" to convey its benefits to the market. When a consumer of package delivery services thinks of time-sensitive materials, they first think of FedEx. They do so based on the brand's value proposition: a promise of timeliness that is supported through an efficient global supply chain. Note that the consumer only cares that her package is delivered on-time, not how it happens. If the consumer believes in the brand promise, she will make her purchase decision on the attribute of the brand, timeliness, rather than by comparing one company's capabilities versus another's. FedEx's brand simplifies the purchaser's decision making and has resulted in consumers flocking to its services in droves relative to its competitors.

While UPS's stock price has increased by 46% in five years, FedEx's stock price has soared by 177% in the same period. FedEx's "The World On Time" clearly trumps UPS's "Synchronizing the world of commerce." Consumers believe in the FedEx brand and the company's ability to leverage its capabilities to live up to that promise.

Constructing a Framework for a Brand

There are two components to any marketing plan: the strategic and the tactical. The strategic aspect of a marketing plan specifies your target segments and the firm's brand attributes. The tactical part of the plan focuses on how you are going to implant the brand attributes in the minds of your target market: what tools (Web, print, etc) you will use to create memory.

The first element of any marketing strategy is choosing a point of differentiation. Philip Kotler of Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management advises: "the key to branding, especially for smaller firms, is to focus on a limited number of issue areas and develop superb expertise in those areas." In *Differentiate or Die*, Jack Trout concurs with Kotler that a marketer must choose one type of differentiation strategy--sacrificing all others--for its brand: product sacrifice (one kind of product), attribute sacrifice (one product attribute), or target market (one target segment in a category). Whichever differentiation strategy you choose, the point of differentiation must correlate with an underserved area of the marketplace; this requires research to understand where the opportunities lie. Following the opportunity assessment, you should identify and test brand attributes with your target market to ensure that they resonate. The firm's positioning emerges out of the attribute definition, and should cement a differentiated brand image in the minds of your target market.

Marketing communications provides the tactical toolbox of the marketer's trade. The goal of marketing communications is to infuse the position of the firm in the short-term memory of the target market, and then to create long-term memory through repetition. This involves a number of activities and complicated trade-offs over an extended period of time. Understanding how your target market behaves will help you determine the most effective communication tools to use.

All target markets are surrounded by a cluttered and chaotic ecosystem of information. As a marketer your role is to penetrate that ecosystem with an offering that provides order to the universe.

Grabbing Attention through Tactical Tools

Getting the attention of the target market and inserting the firm's brand in the memory of your constituents requires the brunt of the marketer's efforts. All target markets are surrounded by a cluttered and chaotic ecosystem of information. As a marketer your role is to penetrate that ecosystem with an offering that provides order to the universe. Instead of creating indirect campaigns that require the consumer to pull information, go for the jugular and move directly to your market through direct mail campaigns, articles, awards, and speaking engagements.

First, abandon your preconceived notions about each of these formats, and try to imagine them as showcase projects that demonstrate your firm's creativity. Your firm is not a corporation, so do not look like one. Avoid tri-fold brochures, 4"x6" postcards, and materials that look like they could have been prepared at the copy shop. Instead, seize the opportunity to create unique formats for your marketing communications so the target market sees your firm's ingenuity and resourcefulness in everything you do. In many cases the visual presentation will form the first impression. Make sure it is the one that you want them to have.

The Web should be placed in the context of how it affects decision making. For service firms the Web is an ancillary tool that serves as stopover between direct attention generating mechanisms and direct contact with the firm.

The Web

The natural inclination is to put most of your marketing efforts into your firm's Web site. This would be a mistake, particularly if the goal is to grab attention. Considering that every firm has a Web site, you are not differentiating your firm by having one. Similarly, making your Web site one of the best in the industry will help your firm, but be careful about sacrificing other marketing communications campaigns in order to do so. Reaching your target market through a medium your competitors do not use is going to grab attention more than your newest way to demonstrate your firm's capabilities in Flash.

The Web should be placed in the context of how it affects decision making. For service firms the Web is an ancillary tool that serves as stopover between direct attention generating mechanisms and direct contact with the firm. Your Web site will often serve as the inflection point in a client's decision making. However, the client must be captivated enough to want to find your firm. Thus, you should focus on the primary tools that grab attention every bit or more than the tools that increase frequency such as the Web.

As a marketer, clearly you should be concerned about your firm's place atop the search engine hierarchy. You have probably already debated and perhaps bought services to raise your firm's Web visibility with search engine optimizers or pay-per-click (PPC) services such as [Google AdWords](#). Search engine optimizer companies can help you write copy or configure your site architecture to perform well in the hierarchy, but they cannot guarantee you top placement. PPC

services are effective for product companies, but make less sense for service firms--considering that service purchase decisions are based on trust and reputation. Therefore, purchasers of services do not rely on search engine key words to find a design partner. They use the Web to reaffirm their initial perceptions. The best way to move to the top of the hierarchy is not through search engine optimizers or PPC ads, but by creating relevant news about your firm that people are genuinely interested in reading.

Direct Mail

Direct mail is one of the most effective ways to grab attention by bringing your messaging directly to the desk of your target market in a unique format. Forget about all the bland junk mail vendors use, and think of direct mail as providing you with a blank slate to innovate--with mail-ability as the only constraint. Direct mail provides an unparalleled opportunity to affect initial perceptions by harnessing what design firms do best: creating a unique and meaningful experience for a user. Your direct mail piece curates the target market's perceptions of your firm instead of leaving the perceptions to chance via a less direct medium.

The goal for direct mail campaigns is to grab attention and raise awareness within particular companies. Do not expect a flood of calls or emails. A successful campaign will prime the pump so that a contact is more receptive to learning about your firm when approached. Of course, your contact list is as essential as the physical mailer. Lists can either be brokered from companies such as [Harte-Hanks](#) or built internally. Like it or not, direct mail is partially a quantity game; plan a 1.5-10% success rate depending upon the quality of your list.

The IDEO brand has endured and deepened since the original Nightline feature in 1999. The challenge for all marketers is to find your own "Deep Dive" Episode that forever cements the attribute you want remembered to your firm's brand identity.

Media Coverage

Media coverage of your firm provides the most important type of marketing; your target market is more likely to trust your messages if they come from authoritative third party sources. People trust the authenticity of media content because they believe in the objectivity and judgment of the reporters and the institutions they serve. As a marketer you should effectively leverage Web, broadcast and print media to convey your firm's messaging. With preparation you can help direct the reporter towards the kind of message about your firm you want articulated.

In the design industry, IDEO is the maestro of the media, using coverage of every facet of the firm to make IDEO the most visible design firm in the world. While IDEO has been covered at least once by most major media outlets, the quintessential spot was the ever-present "[Deep Dive](#)" episode on ABC's Nightline.



In the episode, IDEO had the opportunity to brand the attribute "innovative" to more than ten million viewers. With one fell sentence by Ted Koppel--"...perhaps the most innovative product design firm in the world"--IDEO owned the brand on innovation. This was not by accident. IDEO has diligently cultivated the innovation brand on everything--from book titles to its Method Cards--ever since, and continues to echo the same messaging year after year, publication after publication. Indeed, the IDEO brand has endured and deepened since the original Nightline feature in 1999. The challenge for all marketers is to find your own "Deep Dive" Episode that forever cements the attribute you want remembered to your firm's brand identity.

Awards

It likely comes as no surprise that awards provide another vehicle for capturing attention by thrusting your firm's designs into the spotlight. Similar to media coverage, awards are third party endorsements, and therefore more trusted than self-endorsements. Design awards run the gamut from highlighting eco-sensitivity to focusing on the financial impact of the design on the clients' business. Each award thus has its own brand attributes and associated media outlets. Use this to your advantage.



Only submit applications for awards that have your desired attributes, and for products that you want to represent the firm's brand. Concept projects provide the greatest amount of flexibility for strategic positioning, since you have a blank slate and no messaging restrictions. Having the free reign to craft a concept project message from scratch provides a compelling advantage to

the marketer who is trying to shed a particular kind of attention on the firm.

Public Speaking

Public speaking at conferences and in the media also provides your firm with opportunities to captivate your target markets. Selecting the right venues, topics and speakers pays off exponentially, as one speaking opportunity frequently results in a couple more invitations...and multiple press mentions. The impact of speaking engagements is not to be understated: when else at this stage in the relationship does your firm have the undivided attention of your target market? Audiences infer that someone who is speaking on a subject must be an authority. Establishing domains of expertise means clients will gravitate to your firm due to a brand association with specific kinds of knowledge and expertise.

Case studies are seemingly third party in sentiment, since they detail a project from the client's perspective; however, they are limited in their potency due to their unavoidable quality of self-endorsement.

Increasing Frequency

Now that you have the attention of your target market, increase the frequency of your message to convert short-term memory of the firm to long-term memory. This can be done with myriad other marketing communications tools such as **press releases, case studies, directory listings, client newsletters, job postings, white papers, Podcasts and blogs**. All of these provide the marketer with opportunities to reinforce the messages established with the attention-generating tools. They also send indirect signals to the market about where the firm is heading. While none of these are alone sufficient to generate short-term memory (they don't grab attention), they each can play a significant role in building memory of your firm's brand in the minds of your target market.

One frequency technique worth describing in more detail is the industry norm: **case studies**. Design firms clearly rely on case studies to thrust their capabilities to the fore under the guise of a story. Case studies are seemingly third party in sentiment, since they detail a project from the client's perspective; however, they are limited in their potency due to their unavoidable quality of self-endorsement. While not directly intended, case studies play a psychological game with the audience by harnessing the power of transference, wherein the brand attributes of the client and project are transferred to the design firm. This can be an effective way for you to leverage the positive brand attributes and reputations of your clients to affect perceptions of your firm.

A recent example is the marketing campaign frog design launched around the 30th anniversary of Apple.



Through an extensive discussion of Apple's product innovation, viewers naturally begin the transference process whereby they start to transfer their perceptions of the Apple brand to frog design's brand. (The microsite was a limited run for frog; they've since taken it down.)

Measuring Your Effectiveness

Let's be honest: part of the reason companies do not fund marketing is because it is too hard to measure. Due to the qualitative (brand equity, perceptual shifts) and quantitative (Web analytics, number of leads) aspects of a marketer's role, it is difficult for any company to get a grasp on the total return on their marketing investment. In the infamous words of the founder of Unilever, Lord Leverhulme, "half the money I spend on advertising is wasted, and the problem is I do not know which half." The sentiment probably sounds familiar. Luckily there is a slew of books on marketing metrics with the most recent being, [Marketing Metrics : 50+ Metrics Every Executive Should Master](#). For simplification, focus on three: web traffic, number of leads, and revenue.

Web analytics are being offered by companies ranging from on-demand Web analytics providers to advertisers. The companies vary in fee structures, from monthly subscriptions, to free ([Core77/BusinessWeek's Design Directory](#)). The analytics provide marketers with transparency into such areas of interest as how someone arrived at your site, where they entered, what pages they visited, the domain names of visitors, and a couple hundred other points of information. The sheer amount of information can be overwhelming; however, the one metric you can easily quantify is the number of visitors to your site. The rationale is that your Web site serves as an ancillary tool to all your other marketing communications. Therefore, all your marketing communications efforts can in some way be measured by the amount of traffic to your site. Imagine a funnel with all your marketing communications tools at the top, pouring visitors down into your Web site.

And finally, from marketing to sales

As previously stated, one of the principal roles of the marketer is to deliver qualified leads to sales. The primary way that the marketer does this is through direct mail. Once a mail campaign ends, either individuals within the firm or from an outside agency should follow-up with the recipients to qualify them. "Qualification" assumes that the lead has met a series of established guidelines on who is an appropriate sales target. Qualification guidelines should have some specificity to your firm, but also include standard questions: do they buy outside design services? do they have projects in the pipeline? do their needs fit your firm's capabilities? are they open to working with a new firm? Before starting a campaign, you should set a goal for the number of qualified leads, and then measure yourself against that goal.

While marketers, as defined in the context of this article, are not responsible for generating direct revenue either from billable hours or closing deals, they are responsible for meeting the

annual revenue goals of the firm. A successful marketer will help raise the firm's billable rate by better communicating the value proposition to the market. This is a simple equation: the more someone values your services, the more they are willing to pay you. A marketer should also help improve the close ratio of the sales team. By providing direct and indirect communications to potential new clients, you will influence the perceptions of your firm in the eyes of the target market. If the right perception is created, the close ratio of your sales team should gradually creep up.

*Adam Lerner is Marketing Director of **M3 Design**, an integrated product development firm that creates breakthrough products for the global market. Adam provides brand strategy and execution for M3 Design and occasionally lends strategic marketing advice to clients. He received his M.B.A. degree from The University of Texas' McCombs School of Business and is interested in how product design can be an agent for social change in developing countries.*

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