

The Four Ways to Differentiate & Why Negative Ads Are Run

Winston Differentiating professional service firms is enormously difficult to get firms to do.

Off the top of my head, it would seem there are only four main ways to differentiate a professional service firm:

- 1) Specialize. Specialize in a narrow market niche where word of mouth is sufficient, or in a broad niche, promoting it proudly and loudly.
- 2) Humanize. Feature the people of the firm, humanizing them by showcasing their individuality and highlighting their unique strengths, and team strengths. Sometimes accomplished by poking harmless fun at one's own firm or profession.
- 3) Personalize. Feature the personality (ie culture) of the firm, or a truly unique aspect of the firm or its processes, in a memorable way. Best done with a clever ad series or other public positioning.
- 4) Criticize. Try to get others to see how your firm is better which is, by definition, pretty nearly impossible other than to elevate your firm through reducing your competitors. Typically accomplished by bringing attention to known negative attributes of a firm, or profession in general, or by exploiting negative stereotypes.

Bruce Marcus, author of The Marcus Perspective blog, recently posted about how political "dirty tricks" tactics are "seeping into the legal profession."

It would seem the fourth approach, Criticize, is what the law firm discussed in Bruce's post has done. I think this way is becoming more common because, frankly, it is the easiest of the four ways.

And it's a natural for Big Law and other big professional service firms—not to mention politicians

because The 'Criticize' approach shows confidence and strength whereas 'humanizing' is best achieved by showing people's softer (read: vulnerable) side—not something Big Law lawyers are prone to do. It's also better suited to general firm hype—quite the opposite of specializing.

The 'Specialize' and 'Humanize' approaches are the most effective and easiest ways for marketing to do its job, but firms are REALLY hard to sell (ideawise) on these approaches. It's a shame.

Boutiques and specializing firms of all sizes are enormously effective, even on tight budgets, because they are so focused on a particular market. Because they don't try to go a mile wide, they can go much more than an inch deep.

The 'Personalize' approach is one that the bigger firms all seem want to try but, the thing is, very few firms really ARE so different culturally or operationally that an effective campaign can be pulled off.

A catchy tag-line, cool ad series, or great theme type of image can be employed, but getting this out there is VERY expensive! And ads tend to wear out over time. A mascot can do the trick: think GEICO's gecko or Budweiser's frogs or clydesdales, so, translating to law, think of Womble Carlyle's bulldog (parachuting in the photo above).

So, back to my original point...

'Personalize' is the most expensive of these techniques and the toughest to do well. I assure you the ads and other necessary branding typically run a quarter mil or more--this figure tossed out by Burkey Belser as a minimum for such branding at a presentation he gave to Assoc. for Accounting Marketing back around 2002 or 2003 (to a stunned and disappointed crowd of marketers who knew they'd never get that sort of budget). Burkey is the ad whiz behind Winston's successful launch.

'Specialize' is most effective and needn't be expensive at all. But it requires being willing to do away with the "all things to all people" approach so many firms are fond of. It requires adopting a client-centric mentality.

'Humanize' can be reasonably affordable but requires effort AND confidence to put yourself out there in a way that lets people see you as accessible and someone they'd want to work with.

I think 'Criticize' is simply the easiest, cheapest way to get some attention because it doesn't require much change in behavior or approach. Just some guts.

And, as any toddler will make you aware, receiving negative attention is preferable to no attention at all. We've all heard the saying "there's no such thing as negative PR." But it's not without some baggage, is it?