



BY HEATHER SUTTIE

The Firm vs. The Lawyers

When it comes to promoting your strengths, it's not an either/or proposition; it's how you slice the pie

IT USED TO be that many, if not most, firms marketed themselves and not their individual lawyers. Perhaps this was because a firm tended to be hired on the basis of name recognition and the ease of being found in the phone book. Sometimes the firm's lawyers were included in the listing, or they might appear on the firm's letterhead.

These days, however, listing lawyers in phone books and on letterhead is almost extinct. With the advent of the electronic age and communication vehicles ranging from websites, blogs and email to all sorts of social media platforms, marketing the individual has become more prevalent, especially since many individuals can do so themselves.

As a result, promoting individual lawyers is now equal in importance to marketing the firm, but choosing to promote one over the other isn't an either/or decision. Both need to happen.

> MARKETING THE FIRM

Marketing the firm as an entity unto itself is usually less fraught with political peril, since it tends to be executed in a uniform fashion that doesn't highlight any one person. This homogenous style, however, is a double-edged sword: while it helps cut the risk of anyone feeling left out, it also means everyone can opine on how the firm is presented. Left unmanaged, this "too many cooks" scenario often leads to unfortunate outcomes, such as bland websites, windy practice descriptions and boring brochures, along with immeasurable sponsorships and events that do not support specific business-development cases.



Marketing the firm and doing it well requires publicly declaring the firm's brand – its strengths and unique points of difference – then sticking to it. The constant and consistent delivery of the brand's message usually requires a continuous investment of time, money and resources.

> MARKETING THE INDIVIDUAL

Marketing the individual is important when someone's personal brand comes into play and where a bio done right can make a big difference.

It's well known that bios are one of the most visited areas of any firm's website. Unfortunately many bios tend to be cranked out in a prefabricated style that lacks personality and sparkle. Frankly, no one other than your mother cares about a law school medal, whether it was won yesterday or 20 years ago. What a client is looking for is the right person with the right background to do their work, and they want to see the answer to their needs reflected in your bio — preferably one that is memorable.

The most memorable bio I have ever read was that of Mark Fletcher, now a partner with McConnell MacInnes LLP in Cal-

gary. A former partner of Calgary-based Thackray Burgess when it merged with McMillan LLP in 2009, his original bio was colourful to say the least. Not only did it outline his corporate law expertise, it described his talents as a maker of apple pies who was skilled in animal husbandry and careful to wash his hands between jobs.

Thinking back to that bio, Fletcher believes that the humour provided clues about what his clients could expect

by working with him. He says, "Most commonly I was asked about my claim to bake the absolutely best home-made apple pie, what my pie pastry recipe was, and my thoughts on lard versus shortening. With the ice broken by that point in the conversation, I could be pretty confident that I would end up as their lawyer."

Strong lawyers are the stuff of strong law firms. This is why year-end is the perfect time to take stock of yourself and your accomplishments, and craft a punchy bio to appear on the law firm's site and as part of your social media profile. Breaking out of the bio mould also distances you from the dry-as-dust versions of your competitors. As Fletcher observes, "I see the main purpose of a bio as getting a stranger to call you, and with a bit of humour and approachability, it might be easier for a stranger to make that call."

It worked for him. Whether someone needed advice of a legal nature or for making perfect pastry, the ingredients of his bio made for a successful recipe. ☺

Heather Suttie is a legal marketing consultant. She works with a range of firms: global, national, mid-size and boutique. Reach her at (416) 964-9607, heather@heathersuttie.ca or www.heathersuttie.ca.