Your real brand may not be what you think

By Tim O’Brien

One of the biggest myths around the concept of branding is that it’s something you create for yourself, almost in a vacuum. People tend to presume that it starts with something as simple as instructing your marketing people or graphic designer to come up with a new logo, a tagline, maybe a new website, even some old-fashioned paper brochures and business cards. The whole package.

To be sure, more than a few marketing consultants and designers themselves consider this the extent of branding.

But the truth is, your brand is not something you can create and control in this way.

I had a conversation with an attorney recently on this very topic. What prompted it was that he said, “I am the one who runs the firm. I’m the brand. Clients want to know they can deal with the owner. The owner controls the brand.”

He was partially true on several levels, but the one thing he may have overlooked is that he, or any of us, don’t control our brands. Just because we’re the owners of our businesses does not mean that how we see ourselves is how the outside world sees us. And that’s what brings me to your brand.

A better way to look at your brand is what clients experience when they deal with you and your firm. That’s the foundation of your brand, but it’s still not the whole brand. The next facet of your brand is how your clients and others characterize you and your firm to others. How do they describe you?

When you combine these primary facets of a brand, you have your full brand. What do customers experience when working with you and your firm? How do they share this experience with others?

Human nature being what it is, chances are very good that those with whom you’ve worked with share both the good and the bad, the pros and the cons of working with you. Like it or not, all of these attributes remain integral to your brand.

That’s why it is important to know how others see your firm. Once you have a solid idea of the factors that comprise your brand, then the ideal brand you work to project should reflect the strengths you want to emphasize and seek to address the negatives through correction or minimization.

Perhaps your firm is described by others as not large enough to handle certain matters. Unless you plan to grow exponentially in the next few months, your brand is saddled to some degree with the concept of smallness. Once you know this, you can work to create the impression that your firm’s size is not an inhibitor to taking on some of those bigger challenges.

Of course, whatever you say about your firm must be true.

It’s not uncommon for our firm to conduct interviews with internal and external stakeholders to gain a clearer picture of the client’s brand identity as it is, so that the firm can better manage it going forward. In more than a few cases involving professional services firms, internal perceptions did not match external ones. This is more likely than not. No one sees themselves exactly as others see them.

In more than one case, we found that the firm’s leadership initially leaned towards emphasizing how much they were like other, bigger firms. What the clients told us, generally in a couple of cases, was that while the firm wasn’t all that different from bigger firms in terms of comparable capabilities, the reason they liked working with the firm was experiential in nature. They liked and trusted the people who served them.

When we went back to the client with our report, they were surprised. They had taken their strengths for granted. In the end, we were able to come up with messaging and content that leveraged the input we had, amplifying the firm’s genuine strengths and giving the firm’s marketing activities more authenticity.

You can do the same thing.

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