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Establishing Your (*Positive!*) Brand

By Diane Costigan
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Increased associate salaries and large summer and incoming associate classes indicate that this is clearly a law student's market. While permanent offers will be fairly secured, your summer experience will not be devoid of its share of competition. Whether you are at a firm or in the public sector, you will still be vying against your classmates and fellow interns, all as equally qualified as you, for access to the best work and the best people for whom to work.

Even at the most prestigious of firms and governmental agencies, such resources will always be somewhat limited. In some cases you may not even get access to prime resources, due to all-consuming projects and vacation and travel schedules. Firms and government agencies, however, will have real-time access to your reputation thanks to the all-efficient grapevine.

Given that the fast pace of operation of busy law offices often results in short attention spans and/or short-term memories and the fact that there will always be a competitor who is willing to put in extra time and effort to stand out, you will want to get your name out there, and quickly.

One way to get a competitive advantage in a sea of nameless faces all offering the same product is to establish a positive professional brand that propels you out from the crowd. Distinguishing yourself as a summer associate or intern of choice can provide countless benefits including opportunities for advancement, valuable learning and experience, résumé building, introductions to the right people – even tickets to that Yankee game or play you have been dying to go see. And with only one chance to make a first impression, you don't want to mess it up.

While negative first impressions may be overcome, they never truly go away. There is no point in being memorable if it's not meaningful to your audience. And that's what good professional branding is all about.

What's a Professional Brand?

Simply stated, your professional brand is name recognition or your reputation in the market. It's what you want people saying, thinking and feeling about you in the marketplace with respect to your skill set, your work product, your attitude, etc. Your brand lets people know what they are signing up for when they use your service.

Strong brands keep customers coming back for more by breeding loyalty so that, in a summer associate's case, when a complex, plum assignment comes in, your name is at the top of the list.

Your professional brand should show the value you add to your clients and how you stand apart from the competition.

Your job as an associate or an intern is to make your internal “clients” look good and make their lives easier by delivering quality work product with impeccable service. Those “clients” are the attorneys with whom you work and with whom you want to work.

For those of you at law firms, remember that your associate clients may prove to be your most valuable, as their approval rating may get you the entrée you need to the partners to whom you want access. The more quickly you impress your internal clients, the more expeditiously they will put you in front of their own clients.

It is highly unlikely that you will create your entire professional brand in two to three months. However, you can give it a solid start by building it strategically and intentionally.

Lynn Altman, branding expert and author of “Brand It Yourself” (Portfolio, 2006), suggests that “knowing where you want to end up sets the stage for success” with respect to branding.

This advice does not mean you need to decide right now whether or not you want to make partner at a law firm, go in-house or go on to become a federal judge. Regardless of what your next or ultimate step might be, getting trained, acquiring skills, maximizing learning opportunities and getting exposed to and establishing relationships with the sharpest legal minds in the industry is where you want to “end up.”

It’s About ‘The One Who’ Statements

From this insider’s perspective, the law firm equivalent of a brand is what I refer to as “the one who” statement.

For example, at the end of summer, when most firms literally go through the list of each summer associate to decide on permanent offers and your name comes up, you want it to be followed by: “He’s the one who skipped the farewell reception to go to the printer and helped Partner X close the Y deal.” In reminiscing with colleagues at the city’s top firms, it was not surprising to learn that some of the most memorable “one who” summer associate brands seemed to be negative examples, further reinforcing the importance of establishing a positive brand.

In terms of guidelines then, your brand should never be about negative behavior or execution of poor judgment on your part. You do not want to be “the one who” didn’t play well in the sandbox, who double-dipped summer associate lunches by having early and late seatings, or who never showed up before 11 a.m. or stayed past 5 p.m. unless there was an event.

In addition, it is best to not have the words “drunk,” “violent,” “arrested,” “naked” or “urinated” as the focal point of your “the one who” story. These examples are dramatic but they highlight the impact that your choices can have on your professional brand.

You do not want your brand to be a cautionary tale. Such brands are easy to create but extremely hard to shake.

Here Are the Elements

What about your overall product will inspire brand loyalty?

The most tangible component of any lawyer's brand is solid and stellar work product. Elements of work product that cannot be compromised include: writing, research, analytic ability and effective communication skills.

In addition to your actual work product, and more intangible, is the process you go through to deliver your service. Included on the process side are: teamwork, professional appearance, personality, charm and last but certainly not least, customer service attitude and orientation.

Ideally, your brand should encapsulate positive statements about both the tangible and intangible aspects of what you are evaluated on for a permanent offer. As someone who has seen numerous summer associate classes come and go, here are some positive brands that you can never go wrong with:

- is always willing to learn and accept new responsibilities;
- is always willing to adjust her schedule;
- works well under pressure;
- responds well to criticism;
- has good attention to detail and takes pride in final work product.

At the heart of your brand should be why you want to be a lawyer in the first place. What do you love about the law?

Are you passionate about writing? "Strong writer" should be part of your brand.

Are you highly analytic? Include that in your brand.

Do you enjoy the complexity of large transactions? Work that into your brand.

Does intellectual property get you excited? Establish your brand as an IP subject matter expert.

Also, go back to your résumé and focus on what really distinguishes you from your competition. Did you qualify for the Olympic bobsled team? Translate that into "the one who works hard, is not afraid of competition and is incredibly disciplined."

Did you start your own business prior to joining law school? That is a great start to branding yourself as a creative, risk-taking entrepreneurial summer associate.

Use These Tools to Build It

Some helpful tools in building a "one who" brand can be found in any exercises you have gone through to articulate who you are, what you want to be and what you are looking to get out of life.

Possible examples are your personal statements for college and law school or even online dating profiles and MySpace pages. You may also, at some point in college, have had some sort of personality assessment done like the Myers Briggs Personality Type Indicator®, the DISC® or some other tool. Resurrect these resources as study aids for your branding exercise.

If you need additional research, identify other subject matter experts on you. Such experts could include family (particularly parents or siblings), a significant other, friends (the closer the better), and former employers and professors.

Yet another resource would be an analysis of the brands of other professionals you respect. In addition to other lawyers, you most likely have friends or family members who work for other types of professional services firms, whether investment banking, accounting or consulting.

Large corporations, which are often more sophisticated with respect to training and the professional development of their employees, will also yield positive branding examples. Tap into their knowledge and leverage it in building your brand.

Finally, since client service will be a major component of your brand, think of the best customer service or experience of being a client you have had and draw on that.

Your brand, like your career, will always be a work in progress. It requires constant upkeep and needs to be integrated into everything you do. It must be synonymous with: your work product; your attitude; your service orientation; your appearance; your style of communication and your interpersonal relationships. Seek to reinforce your brand through your actions, intentions, behavior and choice of language.

Given the short amount of time in which you are attempting to build a strong brand, I would encourage you to get some feedback on it.

During your performance review, ask targeted questions related to the brand you are trying to establish. As a general practice, ask for feedback when you complete an assignment. If you are getting repeat assignments, that is always a good indication that your work product and overall package are valued.

Check in with your mentor to see if that person can provide some insight on your brand or your performance in general. Befriend the recruiting and professional development staff members and leverage that relationship to get feedback. They will have almost immediate access to the buzz on the street about you.

In sum, if you want to ensure access to challenging work assignments replete with on-the-job training, skill acquisition and access to the industry's greatest legal minds who can mentor you and be key players in your professional development, positive brand recognition will provide the skin you need to be in the game. A negative brand, or no brand at all, will mean you have not positioned yourself well in your market. Above all, remember that you are your brand.

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