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Marketing: The culture steward of tomorrow's law firm

We work closely with US consultancy Calibrate Legal across UK/US markets. In this guest post, Calibrate's CEO and founder Jennifer Scalzi writes about the gap dividing today's manufactured brands and their respective firm cultures ? and how marketing can help close it.

In theory, your brand is an external reflection of your internal culture. It communicates who you are out loud, so consumers can make an informed decision about whether or not to buy or join.

In practice, however, plenty of companies back into a brand based on perceived client preferences, mirroring the competition, aspirational values or indulging in generous creativity. Sadly, the divide between today's manufactured brands and their respective cultures is wide enough for clients and prospective talent to get lost within.

At a time where real competitive differentiation can help determine the longevity of your firm, it's time to get strategic about culture.

If only you had an internal leader devoted to understanding and communicating your firm's identity and a team of brand ambassadors to support that work.

The role of marketing

Fortunately, your Marketing Director/CMO is that leader, and Marketing is that team. Look to them to bridge the divide between who you are and who you say you are to your target market. The reward is a brand of substance that can be felt on every level of delivery ? because it comes from within.

Marketing has long been the home of your external brand. No one understands or considers your reputation in the marketplace as much as your Marketing Director/CMO and his/her team. Together, they've already done the heavy lifting to analyse your value proposition, market position, client demographics, strengths and weaknesses.

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Yet, this analysis is only one side of the two-dimensional story that defines your firm. For your Marketing Director/CMO to fully execute their function, they need access to and influence over your cultural identity as well. The result: what drives your firm on the outside is a natural extension of the same character that courses through your firm's ecosystem on the inside.

No to: random acts of culture. Yes to: consistent, centralised narrative.

Cultural leadership

Historically, responsibility for 'culture' has been claimed by various, and often competing, constituencies across the firm, ranging from HR initiatives, individual leadership decrees, or a social/culture committee, to name a few. The common denominator here is a lack of strategy to transform these efforts into cultural cornerstones. Instead, they remain random acts of culture that live and die within a vacuum. Yet, these insights are a critical part of the formula that reveals who you really are as an organisation.

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Paying attention to those internal cues will lay the groundwork for a consistent and centralised narrative. More than awareness, this level of branding requires a narrator, someone with the ability to gather meaningful data and communicate it to the people who will share it and those that will consume it. The alternative is a series of independent brands developed by different people, which communicate different cultures to clients, attorneys and all other employees (and at varying degrees of 'reality?'). The difference: cultural leadership.

To provide Marketing with a mandate to guide your firm's culture is to clear a path toward a more substantive brand.

Companies like Tom's, Chipotle and Amazon Smile show us that being upfront about your values is a viable business strategy and yet law firms still look at culture as a matter of environment that applies to the lawyers, but not necessarily to the other employees of the firm.

Equipping a strategic leader to both document and cultivate your firm's principles will capture your internal intellectual property and use it to refine your value proposition to global consumers of your brand.

To be clear, harnessing what is real about your firm and inventing an attractive brand are two different initiatives, the latter being the simpler of the two.

A polished brand is expected in our traditionally conservative market, but it isn't enough to generate any meaningful traction among other strategic brands. Without the internal means to substantiate your external image, it will falter. The margin for error is small when there are online review sites and you are operating within a tight-knit legal community. In an atmosphere of accountability, it's not likely that unchecked employee treatment or non-culture will go undetected. The more sustainable, and financially viable option is to follow your internal blueprint.

When your firm's brand and culture reinforce the same values, your voice in the marketplace is clear and believable. The opposite is true if they don't align. The fusion of internal and external isn't designed to simply create a prettier package, it's meant to set expectations. A values-based brand sets forth what you expect of your firm and what clients and employees at all levels can expect of you as well. It builds a more consistent experience from the top down and fosters an internal atmosphere of purpose. Articulating your culture is a business strategy and no one in your firm is better equipped to affect that kind of clarity than your CMO.

Jennifer Scalzi is the CEO of Calibrate Legal, a US consultancy with which Totum has partnered on both research and recruitment projects across US/UK markets. Calibrate works with law firms to help them achieve optimal performance from their business services teams to elevate their impact on bottom line

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