

LMA Recap: Giving your law firm marketing strategy a gut rehab

As any fan of HGTV knows, sometimes it takes a little more than an area rug and a new coat of paint to get a place up to par. After all, a dilapidated shack with a chandelier is the home remodeling version of putting lipstick on a pig. Sometimes, to get the results you want, you have to go in with a sledgehammer and the courage to tear down a few walls.



Jaffe Staff

Law firms could learn a thing or two from the remodeling world. Lawyers are beginning to understand that the continued financial health of a firm depends, in part, on placing more power in the hands of the marketing department. But, all too often, the changes that are approved are too incremental or, worse, built on a shoddy foundation. What you end up with is a marketing department stuck with a strategy that unfolds like a fixed carnival game: No matter how good the odds look, you're always destined to lose.

At this year's Legal Marketing Association (LMA) Annual Conference, the theme of substantive change was certainly in the air, along with the salty breeze off the Pacific Ocean. Underpinning every session I attended and nearly every conversation I had with my fellow attendees was the notion that legal marketers are facing an uphill battle – not because of a lack of strategic thinking on their parts, but because the market's idea of what a law firm should be has evolved beyond what most law firms are.

At the root of this problem is the concept of [law firm branding](#). For too long, most law firms have, at best, viewed the concept of branding as an afterthought. This puts legal marketers in a vexing position: How do you create a comprehensive marketing program when you don't even understand what you're selling? Sure, every law firm is selling legal services, but that in itself is an encapsulation of the challenge. If everyone is selling legal services, why should anyone buy *your* legal services?

Fortunately, there are some solutions, and they were discussed throughout the LMA Annual Conference. As you'll see, while the path to success might be fraught with pitfalls and opposition, the achievement of glory often requires a certain degree of guts.

Dan Pink on the Buyer's Market

The LMA Annual Conference keynote speaker, [Daniel Pink](#), focused heavily on the contemporary dynamics of the sales process. One of his main takeaways was the fact that the market for goods and services has done a complete flip-flop, morphing from one that empowered the seller in the transaction to one that has now empowered the buyer.

Why have the power dynamics of the sale shifted? The answer is two-fold: information and technology. Technology has provided the framework by which people can freely access and analyze information, and there is a *lot* of information to access.

As an example, Dan cited the process of making a car purchase. No longer does the buyer walk into a potential deal blindly, forced to rely solely on the salesperson, whose incentives might not be aligned with the buyer's. Now, the buyer can do independent research well before ever walking onto a car lot, thus putting the salesperson in a position to prove his or her value.

This power shift has encroached on every industry, including legal services. The market is no longer filled with blind buyers. Purchasers of legal services expect to be able to vet a law firm well before walking into a conference room, and they expect their legal service provider of choice to stand out.

Yet, all too often, law firms *don't* stand out. Everyone is "full-service" or "a small firm with big-firm talent." We hear the same brand identifiers time and again – brand identifiers that frankly sound like lip service.

For law firms to succeed in the sales process, they need to embrace today's marketplace dynamics. They need to develop unique brands. This does not refer to jazzing up a firm logo to alter the color palette. This refers to what a brand actually is: a unique identity in the marketplace that represents an unspoken promise to the buyer.

Content Strategy Is the New Kale

Beyond the development of a firm's brand identity, law firms need to start empowering buyers with better information across multiple technological platforms, or risk turning off buyers who are used to having control in the sales process. This information cannot be developed on an ad hoc basis. There has to be a strategy that synthesizes with the firm's brand identity. This was a key takeaway from the panel discussion "Content Strategy Is the New Kale," presented by [E. Leigh Dance](#), [Deborah McMurray](#), [Norm Rubenstein](#) and [Elonide Semmes](#).

As part of the program, the presenters unveiled what I would refer to as the ideal law firm website. Using the fictitious firm of Reddy + Abel, the presenters walked the audience through what a comprehensive content strategy looks like – one where the firm's brand ethos is reflected in every aspect of design and content.

For example, the site's attorney bio pages – which statistically are one of the most visited pages on law firm websites – were less about beefing up the attorneys' egos and more focused on empowering the buyer with information. Modules of content, including Twitter feeds and relevant blog posts, populated the bio pages, turning them into veritable living documents, in contrast to the static pages that most law firms employ today.

The implementation of this level of content strategy reflects a real understanding of today's market dynamics. By developing a unique brand identity, developing a functional content strategy and then implementing this strategy with on-brand content that empowers the buyer, law firms proactively answer the three crucial questions every buyer has: What have you done, who have you done it for and what can you do for me?

The Story of the Value

So brand identity + content strategy = law firm success, right? Well, not quite. While a law firm needs an identifiable brand that serves as the foundation for a comprehensive content strategy, if the content that populates the framework fails to resonate with its intended audience, then the law firm has just invested a lot of effort into a whole lot of nothing. This was the main takeaway from the panel “The Story of the Value,” which was presented by Jennifer Dolan, [Timothy Delaney](#) and my colleague [Terry M. Isner](#).

The overarching theme of the panel was that incorporating the [principles of storytelling](#) into a law firm’s marketing efforts increases the “stickiness” of the content shared. It’s an idea that certainly isn’t new, but it’s one that has yet to take the legal industry by storm, despite proving successful in many other industries. In fact, as the speakers pointed out, storytelling is one of the oldest forms of communication we as humans have at our disposal. Its longevity alone should be enough evidence that it is an effective communications tool.

By crafting law firm content as story, when appropriate, we can tap into a prospect’s emotional response center. And while emotion might not be the main driver of purchasing decisions, it does play an important role: Emotion-infused content helps make a law firm – and its brand identity – memorable. And what legal marketer doesn’t want their law firm brand to stand out in a buyer’s mind?

Getting Down to the Studs

As you can see, what is beginning to take shape in the legal industry is an understanding that the old way has to become, well, the old way. A law firm that redesigns its website without first taking a hard look at its brand might as well be erecting a skyscraper in quicksand. A law firm that jumps on board the Twitter train without giving thought to its content strategy is like a sprinter running in the wrong direction. And a law firm that develops content devoid of storytelling may as well be making a cake out of cardboard.

There is a logical sequence to legal marketing. The brand must be developed first, followed by a comprehensive content strategy – one that integrates all communication initiatives, from social media to public relations to paid advertising to websites and blogs. Finally, when you do implement the strategy – in whatever form it takes, be it a post on LinkedIn, a press release or a blog post, legal marketers should ask themselves how they can incorporate elements of story to make the content that much more engaging.

The challenge now becomes convincing the stakeholders at our firms that this is the way forward. That’s easier said than done, as some firms might realize they have to raze their current marketing plans and start afresh. That’s a scary proposition, kind of like doing a full remodel of your home. But just as in the world of real estate, it doesn’t matter whether you live in a trailer or a mansion; if the foundation is faulty, you’ve got to do a little demolition to build your dream home.

To discuss your content marketing and branding efforts, contact Terry M. Isner at tisner@jaffepr.com.