

Aligning Communicated and Conceived Brand Promise in Professional Services Firms

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Professional services advertising plays an important role in signaling service quality. Prior research has focused on the expectations of clients in the decision to engage a professional services provider. Yet, little is known about how professional services providers incorporate this information and craft advertising messages that address these expectations such that they are aligned with client needs. This research examines the advertisements of corporate law firms (n = 140) and finds that while most firms are prioritizing the importance of legal expertise, they are failing to recognize the importance of relationships in making connections with prospects and customers.

INTRODUCTION

Attracting new clients and retaining loyal clients is a primary marketing goal for professional services firms. This can only be achieved by delivering a high level of service quality such that client expectations are met or exceeded. On the other hand, evaluating high quality service is also a challenge for clients and potential clients of professional services firms as many professional services firms are difficult to differentiate (Day & Barksdale, 1992). While professional services providers such as lawyers, accountants, advertising agencies, and financial planners depend heavily on personal selling and relationship building for their sales programs (Koku, 2009), advertising also has an important role to play in signaling the promise of service quality and helps to establish a positive image of the firm (Trasorras et al., 2009). Quality service delivery must be promised and delivered with both the unequivocal resource commitment from the provider and the explicit awareness by the provider of client expectations (Kotler & Bloom, 2002). Advertising in professional services has not received a significant amount of attention in the marketing literature; however it enables professional services providers to bridge the gap between the promise and the expectation of service delivery.

Previous research indicates that professional services firms communicate quality service through advertising (Hite et al., 2000) as well as other promotional tactics such as events and seminars. Advertising cultivates commitment and trust by aligning promises and expectations (Moorman et al., 1993). The promise of service quality cues increases the perceived credibility of the service provider among clients (Clow et al., 1996), which can enhance the corporate reputation. The communication effectiveness of a professional services provider is one of the primary drivers of establishing a relationship commitment (Sharma & Patterson, 1999), which can enhance satisfaction and loyalty. Advertisements make promises about a company's brand. Professional services providers may invest considerable resources in advertising, yet the academic research has not examined how these service

providers achieve congruence between their own brand promises and the expectations of their prospects and clients.

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

Professional services are at the extreme of service brands in that they are highly intangible, complex, and customized, making the selection of a service provider difficult and risky. Professional services are credence goods (Darby & Karni, 1973) whereby the benefits of these complex services are both difficult to define prior to sale and may be difficult to evaluate even after the service has been provided. Professional services are heterogeneous and are frequently delivered by highly educated and trained people (Thakor & Kumar, 2000). Professional services clients usually do not receive a refund for services if they are dissatisfied, for example, with a negative legal decision, a poorly tolerated medical treatment, a weak advertising response, or a loss in the financial markets. The client usually has to complete the transaction with the service provider as contractually obligated. Even when the service outcome is satisfactory, a client may still have difficulty ascertaining if the payment of services rendered was appropriate.

Professional services providers are under pressure to change the way in which they related to their markets as a result of more informed clients and an increasingly competitive environment (Reid, 2008). Both technical quality and building more connected relationships with clients are becoming key elements for professional services providers' success. However, the challenge is understanding clients' expectations of service quality at the marketing planning stage, such that effective marketing tactics can be developed (Pels et al., 2001). For these reasons, this research examines the advertising messages that promise quality service by professional services providers and whether these promises are congruent with the factors that clients use to form perceptions of quality service.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A consistent corporate identity enables a firm to attract qualified leads and retain more loyal customers. The creation of a corporate identity involves both understanding what you stand for as a company, responding to client expectations, as well as conforming to industry reputation. The corporate identity literature has expanded from a focus on logos and taglines (van Riel and Balmer, 1997), to a concept which is defined as who the company is and how it wants to be perceived by stakeholders (Balmer, 2001). The corporate identity combines corporate personality, corporate culture, corporate and employee behavior, and industry identity (Melewar & Karaosmanoglu, 2006). The manifestation of the corporate identity is expressed in corporate brand communication, including controlled communication such as advertising. Corporate branding activities address the key question of what promises are being communicated to stakeholders that are intended to increase the value of the firm and its service offerings (Hatch & Schultz, 2003).

Industry identity is particularly relevant in professional services where the reputation of certain practitioners has been tarnished due to uncontrolled crises. Stakeholders tend to group companies together to blame them when scandals or ethical predicaments occur. Some professional services providers have consistently low images that never seem to improve despite significant image campaigns. According to Gallup's annual poll of industry image, which has been conducted since 2001, the industries which consistently rank at the bottom of the list include: banking, real estate, advertising, public relations, and the legal field (Gallup, 2012). Industry identity, therefore, may have a significant impact on the overall corporate identity (Melewar & Karaosmanoglu, 2006).

A coherent alignment of identity is a desired state for a company because it has brand, reputation, and performance implications (Anisimova & Mavondo, 2010). The congruency between communicated and conceived identity is based on Balmer's AC4ID Test. This fourth generation of the ACID test identifies several identity types which group around the corporate brand (Balmer, 2012). Communicated identity is controlled by the organization and includes corporate communication such as advertising, sponsorships,

corporate branding, public relations, and web sites (Balmer, 2001). It answers the question of who the corporation claims to be. The conceived identity is a perception held by key stakeholders and encompasses the expectations organization's corporate brand. It addresses how stakeholders perceive and interpret corporate images and messages. The AC4ID test holds that there should be meaningful alignment between the identity modes such that the corporate brand provides utility and longevity to both the corporation and its stakeholders.

When applied to controlled communication, a brand promise is comprised of words and images that express what clients can expect from interactions with a professional services firm. These corporate brand promises are intended to increase the value of the firm and its service offerings (Hatch & Schultz, 2003).

HYPOTHESES

The business-to-business literature provides preliminary insights into the how clients select service providers. Day & Barksdale (1992) identified four factors that underlie the decision of clients in the selection of a professional services provider: (1) experience, expertise, and competence; (2) an understanding of clients' needs and interests; (3) interaction, relationships, and communication; and (4) contractual conformance. Their research however, did not prioritize the importance of each factor to the client. Hart & Hogg (1998) found that expertise was the most important factor that clients used to evaluate corporate legal services. This was followed by accessibility and involvement, industry specialization, and finally, fees for advice given.

The factors of importance for clients to stay with professional services providers are similar to those for evaluating whether to initially engage with professional services providers. The most important reason for staying was expertise, followed by relationship responsiveness (Stewart, Hope & Muhlemann, 1998). Paliwadana & Barnes (2004) conducted a study on client loyalty and defection in the corporate legal industry in which they ranked the reasons why clients stay with their law firms based on a random sample of businesses in the U.K. The top three factors were identified as (1) technical quality and integrity, (3) relationship responsiveness and (3) compatibility including industry expertise, reputation, and size. In sum, the reasons for how clients select service providers from most to least important is expertise, relationships, industry knowledge, and contractual conformance.

H1: Professional services advertising messages will be congruent with the expectations of clients such that legal expertise, relationships, industry knowledge, and contractual conformance will be prioritized.

Professional services advertising is impersonal however, it is part of the earliest stages in the relationship development process, as the initial step in an information flow with a client. The advertisement contains a message of commitment by the firm to high quality service delivery. These are rational benefits of a service engagement. The goal of professional services advertising is to gain the attention of potential clients by emphasizing the firm's capabilities and resources and to build a positive image among stakeholders via an instrumental approach. This approach emphasizes expertise and problem-solving knowledge so that the audience for the advertisement can make a pragmatic decision on whether to qualify themselves as a potential client.

Research on the most effective dimensions of business-to-business advertising showed both positive and negative impacts of particular advertising cues (Lohtia, Johnston & Aab, (1995). The rational appeal was positive across all four dimensions in their model: the company's orientation or visibility, advertising characteristics, selling proposition, and audience's affective response to the advertisement. Thus, a rational message approach should be used for effective business to business advertisements with logical information being provided on firms' capabilities.

H2: Rational advertising dominates professional services advertising.

Corporate branding in professional services comprises both the promise of service delivery and the creation of sensory based images such as sounds, words, images, and colors that enable a positive brand experience for prospects and clients. (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012). Lohtia et al. (1995) found significant negative cues that diminished advertising effectiveness, including: information on the number of years of experience of the firm, the telephone number, the size of the text (i.e., too much text relative to white space), and the display of crowds of people. Negative cues are those that are less important than the primary content messages. Thus, we hypothesize that more effective professional services advertising will minimize negative cues.

H3: Negative cues will be minimized in professional services advertising.

If the factors that clients use to evaluate professional services providers are known, then the messages that professional services providers use in their advertising should be consistent. Thus, the level of congruity between the information provided in professional services advertising and the attitude held by the target of the advertisement may influence advertising effectiveness (Jayanti, 1996).

METHODOLOGY

The context for this study is advertising by corporate law firms. Law firm advertising began in 1977, when the U.S. Supreme Court held in *Bates v. Arizona*, 433 U.S. 350 held that the legal profession would not be harmed by advertising. The court ruled that prohibiting advertising by law firms was a violation of the constitutional right to free speech. A meta-analysis (Hite & Fraser, 1988) found that professionals were concerned that advertising might have a negative impact on image and credibility. Advertising by law firms is still regulated by each state's bar association, with some states being relatively liberal and others having strict guidelines of what type of illustration or copy is permitted. Nevertheless, advertising by law firms is common place for both corporate and criminal law firms.

The sample advertisements focused on regional and national law firms serving the business-to-business corporate market. The data used in the analysis includes 140 advertisements from regional and national publications. The regional publications include weekly newspapers or monthly magazines aimed at the local business community, such as *The Business Journals*, which publish over three dozen city-focused newspapers. The national trade magazines are aimed at in-house legal counsel and lawyers in law firms. They include *IP Law & Business*, *Corporate Counsel*, and *American Lawyer*. The target audiences for these publications include in-house legal counsel who frequently engages outside counsel due to work overload and/or specialty advice, as well as C-level executives, and business owners.

Content analysis of business advertising has assessed variables such as layout style, headline composition, color, length of copy and vocabulary (Korgaonkar, Bellenger & Smith, 1986; Lohtia, et al., 1995). Content analysis of the advertisements was used (Neuendorf, 2002) and a coding sheet was designed based on Resnik & Stern (1977) with modifications by Lohtia et al. (1995). The advertisements were initially coded by the author. The information in Table 1 was collected.

To establish inter-rater reliability 92 coders were trained in one undergraduate marketing class and two executive MBA classes. Each of the coders evaluated 4 advertisements, resulting in 368 observations. Coder agreement ranged from 75.83 percent to 98.36 percent. A binomial test (Table 2) was first conducted to determine if the proportion of responses where there were two categories (1 = yes, 2 = no) were different. The difference between national versus regional publication and whether there was a logo or not was not significant. All other measures were significant ($p < .05$).

TABLE 1
ANALYZED CONTENT

Was the publication national or regional?
Did a logo appear in the ad?
Did a tag line appear in the ad?
Did a telephone number appear in the ad?
Did a web site address appear in the ad?
Did the headline or copy indicate the age of the firm, how many years it had been in business or when it was founded?
Did the headline or copy indicate a cue that the firm was a global enterprise?
What was the advertising appeal?
What was the brand promise?

TABLE 2
BINOMIAL TEST

	Category	N	Observed Prop.	Significance
National Regional	1	72	.51	.800
	2	68	.49	
Logo	1	71	.51	.933
	2	69	.49	
Tag Line	1	51	.36	.002 *
	2	89	.64	
Phone	1	91	.65	.001 *
	2	49	.35	
Web site	1	133	.95	.001 *
	2	7	.05	
Age/Years in Business	1	21	.15	.001 *
	2	119	.85	
Global orientation	1	30	.21	.001 *
	2	110	.79	

* p < .05

The chi-squared test serves a purpose similar to the binomial test, except that it can be used when there are more than two categories to the variable. The test shows that the differences for advertising appeal and brand promise are significant ($p < .05$). Day & Barksdale's (1992) selection criteria were used in the analysis of H1, which hypothesized that professional service providers' advertising messages, or brand promises, was congruent with client selection factors. For inter-rater reliability, coders were trained to recognize some of the following additional cues to assist them in classification as illustrated in Table 3 below.

TABLE 3
CODING FOR BRAND PROMISE OF LAW FIRM ADVERTISEMENT

Brand Promise	Additional Cues
(1) Legal expertise	Experience, knowledge of areas of law, competence, service quality, qualifications of firm/partners, abilities of partners, list of services offered, recognized by awards/peers
(2) Industry knowledge	Understands client's business, focused on client's business problems, client-firm partnership, working together, knows client's industry, team players
(3) Client relationship	Communication, interaction, listens and responds, rapport, trust, integrity, commitment, dedication to client, personal attention
(4) Conformance	Competitive fees, getting results, resolution, solutions-oriented, cost-effective, winning trials/verdicts

Note. The number on brand promise is the coding number and is used in the cross-tabulations

This analysis suggests that law firms are not listening to what their clients are saying about what factors are most important to them when it comes to expectation of quality service delivery. Palihawadana & Barnes (2004) found that service quality and expertise followed by relationships were the most important loyalty factors. Industry expertise ranked low on the list. The analysis finds that law firm advertising is correctly identifying expertise as a critical service delivery factor, but the advertising as a whole appears to be overemphasizing the importance of understanding the client's business, or industry knowledge. Clients stay with their law firms because of their expertise in complex legal issues and understanding the client's business is not a main reason for loyalty. Relationship management was the next most important loyalty factor, but only captured about 15 percent of legal advertising brand promise in advertising. Hypothesis 1 is not supported. The percentages revealed in the coding analysis are summarized as follows: Law firm's own expertise: 47.1 percent, law firm's understanding of clients' industry: 30 percent, law firm's relationship with client: 15 percent and law firm's efficiency: 7.9 percent.

The coding for advertising appeal included several prompts. An advertisement was considered rational if it was factual, informational, practical, and had logical reasoning. An advertisement was considered positive emotional if it used warmth, humor, or clever copy and illustrations. An advertisement was coded as negative emotional if it used fear, risk, or presented a mild threat (such as going to trial, avoiding conviction) in either the copy or the illustration. For advertising appeal, the most common was rational at 69.3 percent, followed by emotional positive found in 19.3 percent of the advertisements, and lastly emotional negative found in 11.4 percent of the advertisements. H2 was supported.

H3 was examined for the presence of cues such as number of people depicted, race, gender, logo, tag lines, web site address, age of firm, and global orientation. First, the advertisements were examined for the presence of the race and gender of persons appearing in the advertisement. For race, 38 of the 140 advertisements had a person in the ad in which race could be assessed. For gender, 44 of the 140 advertisements had a person in the ad in which gender could be assessed. If a person was in the advertisement, 81.6 percent of the time, that person was white, while 18.5 percent of the time the person was another race, or if there was more than one person, both white and another race was depicted. If a person was in the ad, the gender was male 64.4 percent of the time, and female 39.1 percent of the time. When more than one person was in the ad, both males and females were depicted 29.5 percent of the time, with the balance being both males. Generally, when people were depicted, small groups were used and these photographs may or may be actual members of the firm.

Several variables were assessed on whether they were included or not included in the ad, such as logo, tag line, web site, age of firm, and whether the firm communicated a global orientation. A phone number was only found on 65 percent of advertisements, while a web site was found on nearly 95 percent of the advertisements. Larger corporate law firms may have a decentralized organizational structure in which each regional office has its own independent marketing function with separate phone numbers. The advertisements may have also served as corporate or institutional advertisements with no call to action. A phone call is an invitation to begin the sales process, while the purpose of the advertisement may have been image building.

Corporate identity including logos and tag lines, were treated with relative indifference. Law firms are reluctant to fully embrace a branding philosophy (De Chernatony and Horn, 2003) and may not see the value in creating a distinctive corporate image. The use of a tag line, in addition to being one of the least used cues, was also one of the lowest frequency items in the analysis of inter-rater reliability. In discussions with raters, many of them found it difficult to tell the difference between a tag line and a headline or a call-out.

The age of the firm was not included in most of the advertisements. Copy which referred to the global presence of a law firm, including words such as worldwide, global, or international, was also not heavily used by either the national publications or the regional publications. There was no significance in the cross-tabulations, under the assumption that law firms who advertise in national publication may have a more global orientation than regional or local law firms. Another explanation may be that law firms, regardless of size or target market so not see a global orientation as a key selling proposition. A summary of the frequencies is illustrated in Table 5.

H3 was generally supported and the presence of negative cues was generally minimized. Cues which do not specifically address content such as performance quality are considered negative cues.

**TABLE 5
FREQUENCIES**

	Yes, included in ad	No, not included in ad
Logo	50.7%	49.3%
Tag line	36.4%	63.6%
Phone number	65.0%	35.0%
Web site	95.0%	5.0%
Age of firm	15.0%	85.0%
Global orientation	21.4%	78.6%

An analysis of cross-tabulations examines two variables at the same time by reflecting the joint distribution within a limited number of categories. The cross tabulation between advertising appeal and brand promise was significant (Chi-Square = .002). If the advertising appeal was rational, then the likelihood is that the brand promise will be focused on (1) legal expertise, (2) industry knowledge, and (3) relationships. If the advertising appeal was emotional-positive, then the likelihood is that the brand promise would be (1) Industry knowledge, (2) legal expertise, and (3) relationships. If the advertising appeal was emotional-negative, then it is most likely that the brand promise is (1) industry knowledge followed by (2) legal expertise with no relationship messages. This is illustrated in Table 6: Crosstab Ad Appeal * Brand Promise. Relatively, emotional-positive advertisements considered industry knowledge,

legal expertise and relationships equally important which has implications for the importance of supplementing the rational messages with some emotional content.

TABLE 6
CROSSTAB AD APPEAL * BRAND PROMISE

		Brand Promise				
		1	2	3	4	
		Legal expertise	Industry knowledge	Relationships	Conformance	Total
Ad Appeal	1 – Rational	53	23	13	8	97 (69%)
	2 – Emotional-positive	9	10	8	0	27 (19%)
	3 – Emotional-negative	4	9	0	3	16 (12%)
Total		66	42	21	11	140

Chi-square Significance = .002

RESULTS

Prior research found that selection criteria that clients use to choose or stay with a professional services provider is prioritized by the following factors, expertise, relationships, industry knowledge, and contractual conformance. Each of these criteria was explored by content analysis of 140 advertisements by national and regional corporate law firms. One of these brand promises, expertise, predominated in all of these advertisements. Further, each of these brand promises had a significant impact on the advertising appeal utilized. Brand promises featuring expertise were related to rational appeals. Brand promises related to expertise, industry knowledge, and relationships were significantly associated with emotional-positive appeals. Brand promises related to industry knowledge were significantly associated with emotional-negative appeals.

Law firms do prioritize the importance of expertise in their advertisements, but they under emphasize relationships and over emphasize industry knowledge. Thus, there is a lack of balance between the professional services provider and the client in the signals being sent via advertising messages. Law firm marketers should listen more carefully to what their clients are saying and evaluate whether emphasizing industry knowledge is an important brand promise impacts client acquisition and retention. This study suggests that emphasizing relationships may be most effective when emotional advertising appeals are used. Building relationships in a professional services context leads to greater customer satisfaction and higher customer retention (Eriksson & Vaghult 2000).

For a professional services firm, the length of time in business as depicted in an advertisement signals the successful delivery of quality services over many years. A significant number of law firms, both national and regional, however, did not emphasize this potential competitive advantage in their advertisements. Lohtia et al. (1995) found that the number of years of experience had a negative impact on advertising effectiveness, so despite the impressive difference between law firms who had been in business for almost 100 years and those who had only a few years of operations, it does not benefit law firms to emphasize this fact in their advertising. The significant and low percentage of this omission indicates that this information should be used cautiously in professional services advertising.

The data suggest that law firms emphasize mostly rational advertising appeals. Nearly 69 percent of the advertisements in our sample were rational. They may be missing an opportunity to increase advertising effectiveness by not supplementing their advertising messages with more emotional-positive

appeals. The use of an emotional-negative appeal is probably the least effective because there is already a negative affect toward the law industry in general. Tellis (2004) identifies several advantages of emotional advertising over rational advertising including that processing requires less effort, and the content is more interesting, easier to recall, may stay in memory longer, and may lead to the desired action sooner than rational-based advertising.

CONCLUSIONS

This analysis of a convenience sample of advertising for professional services was revealing in how message appeals are congruent or not congruent with the factors that lead to client satisfaction and loyalty. The analysis confirms the majority of corporate legal advertising appeals are consistent with at least the most important reason for client loyalty: and the level of expertise and competence of law firm advice. Marketers are evidently missing several opportunities to provide signals to the second most important selection criteria – relationships. While it is true that one corporate client is doing business with another partnership entity, fundamentally, doing business in a professional services context is about relationships, trust, and quality of communication that is nurtured and developed over a period of time.

Another implication for marketing managers is that law firms should leverage their age or number of years in business as a signal of quality with caution. While the age of the firm connotes stability, legitimacy, experience and past success, clients did not hold this attribute as high as several other factors. Age can also create the perception of being old fashioned, inflexible or not innovative. And, finally, legal advertising should make more of an effort to create advertisements with a more emotional-positive appeal because of the finding that clients want an emphasis on relationships and client care. The idea that more emotionally-based advertisements should be utilized in the legal services industry may be incongruent with the more prevalent rational informative approach in business to business; however this moderate level of incongruity may lead to more elaborate processing of the advertisement and lead to a more favorable attitude toward the ad and toward the brand.

The present findings may serve to provide corporate law firms in particular and professional services providers in general with more insight into the effort to match client expectations with the law firm brand promise.

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