

How to Build Brand Recognition at your Professional Services Firm

ON [MARCH 8, 2017](#) / BY [PSDTOBLOG](#)

If you were asked to identify the biggest challenge facing professional services firms today what would you say? Building expertise? Closing new business? Getting more referrals? It may surprise you to know that the answer is none of these.

According to Hinge's brand research, the biggest challenge facing professional services firms is getting in front of enough new prospects to grow their practice — in other words, visibility and brand recognition.

So what's a professional services firm to do if it wants to graduate from being a small local firm to one with regional or national exposure? Or vice versa, if a large firm wants to expand its brand recognition beyond its reputation for a particular niche or region? Either way, you'll have to make some substantive changes to your marketing. It's not enough to be well liked by your clients. Even if every client were to refer you once, that wouldn't generate enough business to fuel strong growth. Some think networking is the answer. However, face-to-face networking is limited by the number of interactions you and your team can have with prospects. And only a tiny fraction of those will ever become clients.

Instead, you'll need to think differently. To build the type of brand recognition that produces strong growth requires a more efficient and scalable approach to marketing.

But before I get into how that works, let's pause a moment and define our terms.

What is brand recognition?

Brand recognition can mean two things:

- The rate at which people in the marketplace can identify a brand when they encounter some aspect of its identity — its logo (think Nike), a color (think UPS's brown or FedEx's purple) or a slogan ("Don't leave home without it").
- The general awareness of a company in the marketplace. If someone were to ask you to refer a good accounting firm, for instance, what name would come to mind?

While these two definitions are related, the first applies more readily to consumer-facing brands that spend heavily on advertising to build widespread visibility. The second definition is more applicable to professional services firms, where name recognition is king. Many law firms, for example, set their names in simple type. Their brands are more verbal than visual. For this reason, I will be focusing primarily on this second definition.

What Doesn't Work

Let's first discuss what doesn't work so well. [Ten years of research](#) has shown that some common marketing techniques just don't deliver much value. Here are three low-performing techniques you may want to minimize or avoid:

- **Sponsorships** — Other than generating a small amount of visibility for a short amount of time, sponsorships don't really move the needle.
- **Advertising** — If you have millions of dollars to spend to expose people to brand hundreds of times, advertising can be a powerful persuader. If

you are a typical professional services firm with a limited budget, however, online and print ads usually do little to generate brand recognition or new business. (There is one possible exception: pay-per-click advertising can be effective for certain kinds of businesses.)

- **Tradeshows** — Often time consuming and inefficient, tradeshows can cost more to attend than they produce in revenue. Use your judgment here, as some industries (such as defense contracting) rely on tradeshows to build critical relationships and close deals. Tradeshows can also provide value if you do more than just attend them. Make the effort to be a presenter or participate on a panel discussion.

A Content-Based Strategy to Build Brand Recognition

So what works? How does a small or mid-sized firm become better known without spending a budget the size of Proctor & Gamble's on advertising?

Here's the good news. The most effective way to spread your reputation far and wide is to leverage the expertise you have under your roof. As a firm of experts, you've got the raw materials already.

The bad news is that you've got to mine that ore, smelt it and hammer it into something people want. That means turning your expertise into valuable educational materials for the kinds of people who buy your services.

Examples of these materials include speeches (which your experts deliver at conferences), blog posts (which are SEO optimized and written to attract new prospects), executive guides (which can be placed behind registration forms to capture new leads, research studies (which can build your reputation as industry leaders) and books (which can generate valuable PR and credibility).

If you've never thought about marketing in this way, it can be a challenge at first to motivate your team and change their thinking about marketing. But once you get the hang of it, content-based marketing can work incredibly well.

Can it work at your firm? Absolutely! Here are two professional services firms that have experienced considerable success after embracing a content-based approach to marketing.

- India-based Nishith Desai Associates was honored last year as Asia's Most Innovative Law Firm. They earned that distinction because their attorneys diligently research and write about emerging areas of the law (such as the legal implications of Bitcoin and self-driving cars). They made a conscious decision to build outposts at the frontiers of the law and they use that expertise to attract the attention of government, corporate and international clients.
- Sightlines is a firm that provides facilities management expertise and benchmarks to colleges and universities across the nation. They blog frequently, produce webinars, write executive guides on topics of interest to their facilities manager prospects and produce authoritative annual research on the state of academic facilities. This public exposure of their expertise has helped make Sightlines the dominant player in their industry.

Both of these firms have mature content marketing programs today. But you can start small. For instance, you try blogging a couple of times a month or writing an executive guide or a white paper. Then little by little, get more of your team involved. Look for public speaking opportunities, blog more frequently, maybe write a book!

The more you put into a content-based approach to brand building, the more widely you'll become known and the more loyal followers you will attract. Eventually those followers will begin referring you. And when they are ready to buy services like yours, your name will be at the top of their list.

Bottom Line

If you want to grow your business, it's not enough to focus on your craft alone. You need to begin translating some of that expertise into broadly available educational materials that will enhance your reputation *and* your visibility. By addressing both of those dimensions, you'll build brand recognition — and

your firm's revenues and profits will rise with it.