

How to stand out from the crowd

Seven principles to make your law firm stand out in a crowded international market place, by **Pippa Blakemore**

An increasing number of law firms are competing for the same work across continents and within countries far away from their headquarters. To succeed internationally you need to stand out and clearly differentiate yourself from your competitors.

Seven principles should help you to create and maintain a high profile among the target clients in the jurisdictions of your choice.

These seven principles are based on the belief that the focus of your approach and strategy should be on your clients and not yourselves. Change “I” and “we” to “you” in every sentence and thought. There is no quick fix to standing out. But this approach will differentiate you from everybody else whose approach is “we want to be...” rather than “our clients want us to be...”

Principle one: Understand your target countries, jurisdictions, contacts and their business

As you know, this is a fundamental principle of all business development. This can be difficult enough in your home market and is a great deal more complex internationally. You need a deep knowledge and understanding of the political, commercial and economic environments in which the businesses you are targeting operate. You need to research, learn and absorb this information so that it becomes as familiar as your own culture.

It is important to decide how to source this research. If it

the organization. Both cultures need to be recognized within one person and relationships developed accordingly.

You need to appreciate the different (not better or worse) ways of doing business (without criticism or jokes) and that will enable you to stand out. You also need to be aware that countries within continents differ hugely, so avoid making statements such as “We are expanding into China, or developing in India” which may indicate a lack of understanding of the continent.

Principle two: Be clear on the benefits of your approach and structure to all involved

The benefits of your international approach, whether it be merger, close association, alliance, best friends relationships or setting up a new office need to be known and be able to be articulated by everybody concerned: clients, partners, lawyers, recruits and every member of the firm.

The clients want to know how it will work in practice. Why is the structure you have chosen the best one from their perspective? A blitz and win attempt at standing out with your particular approach will not convince clients or contacts. For example, a large opening launch party of a new office with correspondingly heavy media coverage will not win business and establish a firm in a local market. That would be like holding a house-warming party where members of your family ask as many of the new neighbours as possible to marry them.

This strategy of spending huge amounts of money initial-

“Every lawyer in the firm needs to be able to summarise the benefits of the international approach in 13 seconds”

is from within the country in its own language and is translated, this will enable you to get a real feel for how that country sees itself from within. If you rely on external analysis, then you need to take into account that the research will be filtered through the cultural identity of the researchers.

While some may say that the language of international business is English, speaking local languages will greatly help you to understand the nuances and facilitate the building of relationships.

It is essential to understand local culture, traditions and good manners. For example in England, it is often considered rude to leave food on your plate at the end of a meal. In China, if you eat all the food on your plate, it means that you are still hungry. This has resulted in discomfort on both sides, Chinese hosts desperately bringing more and more food and the foreign guests continuing to eat more and more to please their hosts.

Time is relative in different countries. Being a minute late in Scandinavia may be considered rude. Arriving two or three hours late is the norm in some parts of Africa and, in other parts of the world, waiting two days for an agreed appointment is not uncommon. Obviously the standards are all more universal in business, but local idiosyncrasies should not be underestimated.

There is an added dimension to understanding individuals within businesses who may have worked and been educated abroad and then returned to their country of birth to run

ly, followed by spasmodic and inconsistent bursts of enthusiasm, will gradually decline into demoralization abroad and cynicism at home with a corresponding undermining of profile in the new market.

The long-term strategy for communication needs to be clear between each international office, partner, associated firm and the home base. Publicise successes from home on an international level, and from the international to the local, so that the whole firm and those with whom it has relations can share in successes and be proud of them. Long-term support will ensure those in foreign offices are not perceived as having a glamorous lifestyle and so alienated from the home base. The home base plays an important part in standing apart from the competition as well. Business is international. Checks are carried out by clients and contacts all over the world and not just in the new market. Clients want to know that the long-term commitment is there throughout the firm.

Every lawyer in the firm needs to be able to summarise the reason behind and the benefits of the international approach, whether expansionist, targeted, boutique or high-end, in 13 seconds, with an example. “We have an office/alliance/best friend in...which means that our clients can buy and sell companies in several jurisdictions as quickly as is possible. For example, we have just...” Can your partners do that? Can all your lawyers do that?



All relationships will need constant long-term maintenance for you to retain the strength and presence in the international market. If those implementing the original plan have to leave to move on to new projects then responsibility has to be handed over to equally dedicated people who will maintain the relationships.

Long term and even short-term neglect will lead to disaffection, dissatisfaction and desertion. The latter can undo years of careful profile nurturing.

To stand out from the competition over the long-term, whatever the time you think you will require to create and maintain the new international presence – double it. Whatever financial investment and resources you think you need – double them. Whatever energy you think you need – quadruple it.

Principle three: Passion, commitment and consistency throughout the firm

Clients and contacts do not want to feel that they are part of a your marketing plan to build your fee-income and increase your profit per equity partner, or boost the fortunes of a firm which is ailing in its home market and wants easy wins abroad. They do not want to feel that every visit is a sales visit. They want to know when you are coming to visit them next. They want to feel that you are genuinely interested in their country, them as individuals, their objectives and helping to provide solutions to their problems. This was clearly demonstrated when two of the largest international law firms were competing for the same client in India. The client told the one that did not win, “your competitors were here for days at a time, made several long trips and spent their time sitting in our offices, talking to our people trying to get under our skin and really understand us. You made one or two marketing trips. That was why the other firm won. They stood out as really wanting to understand us and our business.”

Commitment to clients and their objectives is demonstrated through a passion for work of the highest quality delivered consistently from good friends, office to office and from practice area to practice area. This is challenging enough in one firm in one office. Robust systems must be established at the start of relationships and maintained with all the passion and commitment required.

Principle four: Be where your target clients, intermediaries, referrers and contacts are

To stand above the competition you must leave your comfort zone where fellow lawyers are and join those professional organizations and bodies where your potential clients and contacts are.

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Be the apple, not the pear

It is tempting to join organizations in which there are many other lawyers. You talk the same language, have the same problems and challenges. It is comforting to know that there are others with the same difficulties. However, this indulgence must be your reward for attending your clients' business forums.

This focused and targeted approach will involve becoming a member of international organizations of your targeted industries, sectors and companies and where the decision makers in these organizations are likely to be. It involves developing a profile among these bodies. It includes targeting the appropriate media that your clients, contacts and intermediaries will read/watch from their perspective and in their language. Publicise your presence at every opportunity.

For example at parties, actively make the decision not to talk to friends and acquaintances in the legal profession but push yourself to discuss the objectives and challenges of the businesses in which your clients and potential clients are. This necessitates setting targets for developing contacts with a systematic approach to building and maintaining relationships.

Principle five: Clear and appropriate branding in the right place

Ensure that your brand, logo, strapline and colours are appropriate for each different country in which you wish to raise your profile and enhance your name.

Make sure it has impact and it is memorable – for the right reasons. Think about having the logo and the words translated into the writing of the country of which you are marketing. Does the country read from left to right, or from right to left, or is their writing in columns? Position the logo and the strapline so that they make an impact accordingly.

Your messages need to be simple, substantial and relevant to those you want to attract and impress. A good check is not “what do we want to tell them?” But rather, “what do they want or need to hear about us and how do they want to hear it?” Your research will tell you where you need to focus to make an impact in that country, locality and culture. It will also help you to avoid offending by accident.

Your messages need to be the benefits of what you offer: how you will help. Use words that are meaningful to that culture. Check all translations with a native speaker of the country. If the firm claims to be fluent in the local language then the translations need to be perfect.

Your brand cannot be isolated from your lawyers. Your brand is your lawyers. So create systems of rewards, recognition and investment in staff development so that you can build up the loyalty of staff who might be poached by competitors. Ensure that each lawyer reflects your brand and is an ambassador for your firm so that it consistently stands out from the competition by its confidence in projecting its own image.

Principle six: Use the right people

The right people understand the importance of building relationships and trust in the long-term, which could be five to 10 years. They will be dynamic, enthusiastic risk-takers, who are persistent but sensitive: flexible but structured and who are hungry but not desperate for new business at the international level.

They will need to appreciate that if a high profile is difficult to develop at home, it is many times more challenging on an international level. Cross-firm and cross-jurisdictional teams need clear leadership, management and a strong team culture with superb communication skills.

The right people will recognize that word of mouth is the most powerful and trusted form of referral, and that they may need to be away from home and travelling to build this personal reputation. So the right people will require supportive families. However, its one-to-one personal nature is becoming increasingly powerful with the internet, when a reputation can be made or broken at the touch of a button, with millions on the receiving end of the first-hand reference.

Principle seven: Regularly measure results and take immediate remedial action

Immediate remedial action when things do not go according to plan will separate you from the competition. This is not “wait and see and I am sure it will get better”. It is a proactive demonstration of how you deliver your legal services.

Your strategy needs to include measurable and achievable targets of profile creation and brand maintenance, with a comprehensive and detailed plan to achieve them. There are two types of targets: the first type is activities, for example, conferences, seminars, events and meetings. The second type is results, for example number and type of clients won and fee-income quality and volume of work.

Legal, tax and regulatory frameworks within a country need to be carefully considered before embarking abroad to

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ensure that you are prepared for the long-term and you stand out for the right reasons.

You need a transparent, consistent and appealing pricing policy, that recognizes the potential for conflict between local market rates and international rates. To stand out from the competition you will have worked out how much work there will be for you to do, how big the deals are and for how long the work will last to make the pricing appropriate for the work, and use this work to build your profile and long-term credibility.

You need to identify objective measures of success, monitoring expenditure against results and taking remedial action speedily, and not assuming that it will get better, or re-organizing or abandoning this jurisdiction, rather than analysing the causes and solving them.

These seven principles provide a framework for you to stand out and distinguish yourself from your competitors and ensure your long-term success on the international stage.



Meet in Singapore: Christoph M. Pestalozzi, Urs Haegi, Marc Russenberger, David Jenny, Roland M. Müller, Rolf Auf der Maur