

# Differentiation is dead.

Law firms and the search for distinctiveness

# Story

1. Start
2. On the inside
4. On the outside
6. Being distinctive
10. End

# Start.

90% of what one law firm is the same as every other. 10% is distinctive. The challenge is to articulate, communicate and demonstrate what that 10% is.

*Differentiations is Dead* will examine how well the top 200 UK law firms articulate and communicate their 10%.

It will explore their values, how they describe themselves and their core marketing messages. It will highlight the disconnection between what law firms say they're like on the inside and how they communicate it on the outside.

It will then propose a practical and straightforward way for them to become RAD (relevant, authentic

and distinctive). It will end with a simple and practical framework for saying what you do and doing what you say.

On the face of it, clients have huge amounts of choice, but what kind of choice is it? When everyone says and does the same thing clients will make a choice based on the only thing they can – price. This isn't good for anyone.

Ultimately, *Differentiation is Dead* will lay bare how law firms market themselves on their 90%, not what makes them distinctive.

The question is - what's your 10%? Something distinctive exists in every law firm. It just needs uncovering.

# On the inside.

## Values. The DNA of what makes you distinctive

Values are the foundation of what makes an organisation distinctive. They're about culture and personality. They represent the actions and decisions that people take instinctively.

You can't tell someone what values they have; they either have them or they don't. You can't tell someone to be innovative, collaborative or creative if, by their very nature, they aren't.

Exploring the specific values law firms have and the type they fall into a number of things emerge; some obvious and some less so.

First, all law firm values fall into one of nine traditional types. Straight away, law firms are telling clients and prospects that they are all exactly the same.

Second, many values don't hold true. The most popular specific value is teamwork, but most law firms still talk about the challenges of cross-selling and encouraging partners to work with colleagues in other practice areas.

'Innovation' values are the fourth most popular. However, few would challenge the notion that law firms are innately conservative and risk-averse organisations.

This gives the impression that many firms choose values they think clients want, or represent what they would like to be, rather than what they actually are. This is dangerous. A broken promise is worse than no promise at all.

Third, many values should be redundant. After teamwork, the most popular values in order are integrity, respect, excellence, commitment and quality.

Lawyers should embody these qualities as a matter of course. So should everyone who works for the firm. You wouldn't (or shouldn't) recruit people who aren't professional and dedicated or don't have integrity.

Law firms are highlighting the 90% of their business that's the same as their peers rather than emphasising the 10% that makes them distinctive.

Value	Definition
<b>Building relationships</b>	<b>Being approachable and friendly, building strong relationships, flexibility</b>
<b>Client focus &amp; commitment</b>	<b>Exceeding expectations, being ambitious, putting clients at the core of the firm</b>
<b>Commerciality</b>	<b>Business focus, pragmatism, understanding the client's business</b>
<b>CSR</b>	<b>Citizenship, sustainability, being a responsible member of the community</b>
<b>Excellence &amp; quality</b>	<b>Technical quality, rigour, attention to detail, precision</b>
<b>Innovation</b>	<b>Creativity, entrepreneurship, original thinking, continuous improvement</b>
<b>People &amp; respect</b>	<b>Investing in people &amp; talent, mutual respect</b>
<b>Professionalism &amp; integrity</b>	<b>Accountability, working hard, taking responsibility, behaving with integrity</b>
<b>Teamwork</b>	<b>Collaborating, being collegiate, working together as one team</b>

All they're doing is telling the world that their people are highly able technical lawyers who take their jobs seriously and work hard.

Values matter because people and relationships matter. Clients and prospects are presented with lots of technically good lawyers who take their jobs seriously and work hard, but they choose to work with lawyers who have something else on top.

Law firms need to work out what that something else is that characterises their culture and approach.

To do this they need to spend more time finding out from their clients what it's like to work with them and more time finding out from their people what it's like to work for them.

To be really successful, firms then need to build values into all of their internal processes - recruitment, appraisals, reward and promotion.

Firms need to demonstrate, overtly, that the people who champion their values are the people that will be successful within the business - and the people that don't champion their values won't succeed.

### Most common values in descending order

Teamwork

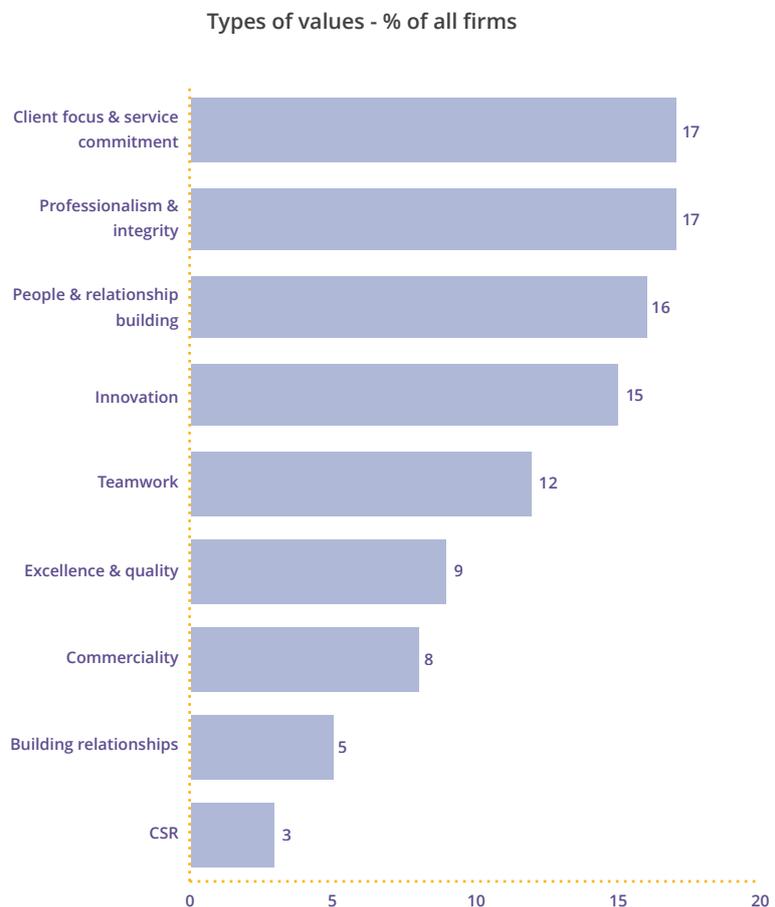
Integrity

Respect

Excellence

Commitment

Quality



# On the outside.

## Who are you?

Imagine you're a client or prospect. In front of you sits a selection of pitches from law firms bidding for a piece of your work or place on your legal panel. From the front cover, they all look broadly the same, with a similar range of images and titles.

You open them up and, after being thanked for giving them the opportunity to submit a proposal, you read their lift speech (or elevator pitch if you're in the US) – the 'about us' sentence designed to grab the attention.

What you'll read is a series of

almost identical statements; totally interchangeable, bland and homogenous. They offer nothing of value

Rather than helping them stand out, what law firms do when they talk about who they are is blend in.

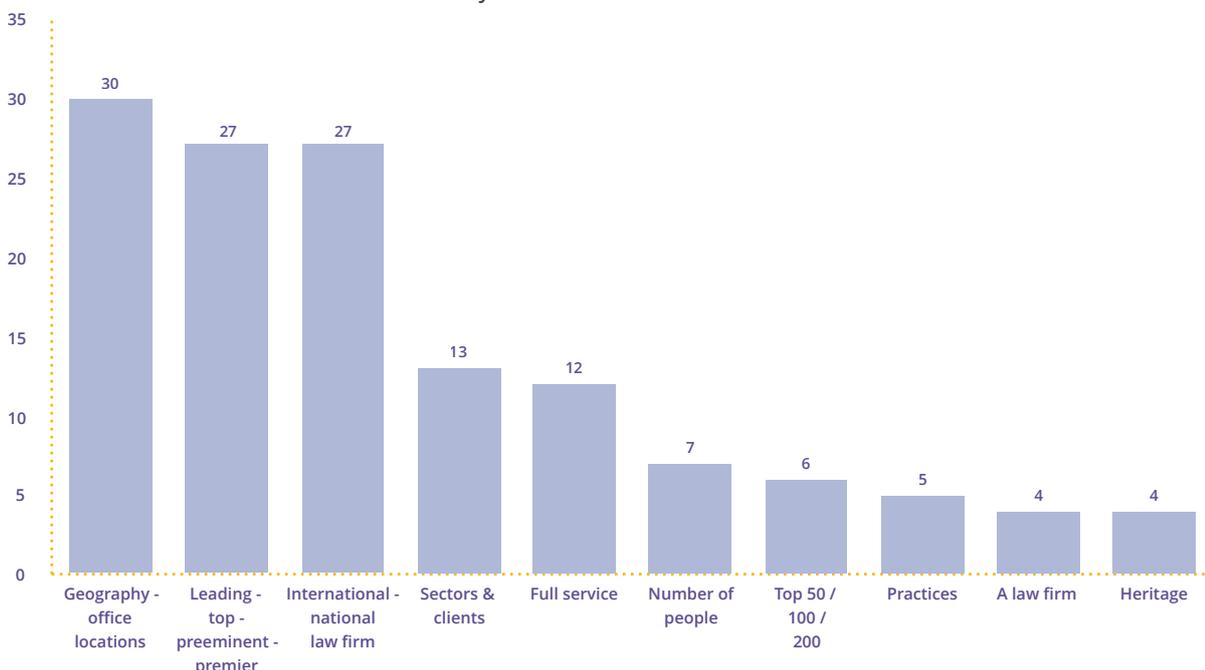
30% of the top 200 UK law firms describe themselves according to location, geography and where they have offices. 27% describe themselves as leading, top, preeminent or premier. 27% of top 200 firms tell you that they're international, national or regional. Size and scale seems to be everything.

Only 13% of firms talk about the sectors and clients they work with. In the majority of cases, the descriptions are so vague (corporate and public sector clients, financial institutions, global corporates, private individuals etc.) that they're virtually meaningless.

Very few firms describe themselves in a way that helps people understand who they are or helps them stand out.

Worse, almost all of the 'about us' statements from the top 200 UK law firms are features-based; virtually no-one talks about what they do or how they help clients.

Most common ways law firms describe themselves - % of all firms



## Why you?

All law firm marketing is based on the same eight messages.

80% is concentrated in just five messages, generally the same across each different law firm population. Again, law firms market themselves on the 90% of their business that's the same rather than the 10% that's distinctive. They assert rather than demonstrate; they say rather than show.

Clients come to law firms because they have a problem they're trying to solve, an issue they're trying to fix or something they're trying to do. However, law firms spend the least amount of time talking about the things that clients are most interested in – how they can help them.

Message	Definition
Client focus & service delivery	Building client specific teams, delivering services consistently across offices, being integrated across practices
Geography	Geographic reach, office locations, local knowledge
Heritage	Length of time in business
How we help	Adding value and achieving results
People & relationship building	Being approachable and collegiate, understanding the individual, building strong working relationships
Sector & commercial knowledge	Sector knowledge, understanding the client's business, business focus
Size & scale	Number of offices, number of people, turnover
Technical expertise	Quality of legal advice, directory rankings

**Most common ways law firms describe themselves in descending order**

**Geography and office locations**

**Leading, top, preeminent or premier**

**An international or national law firm**

**Sectors and clients**

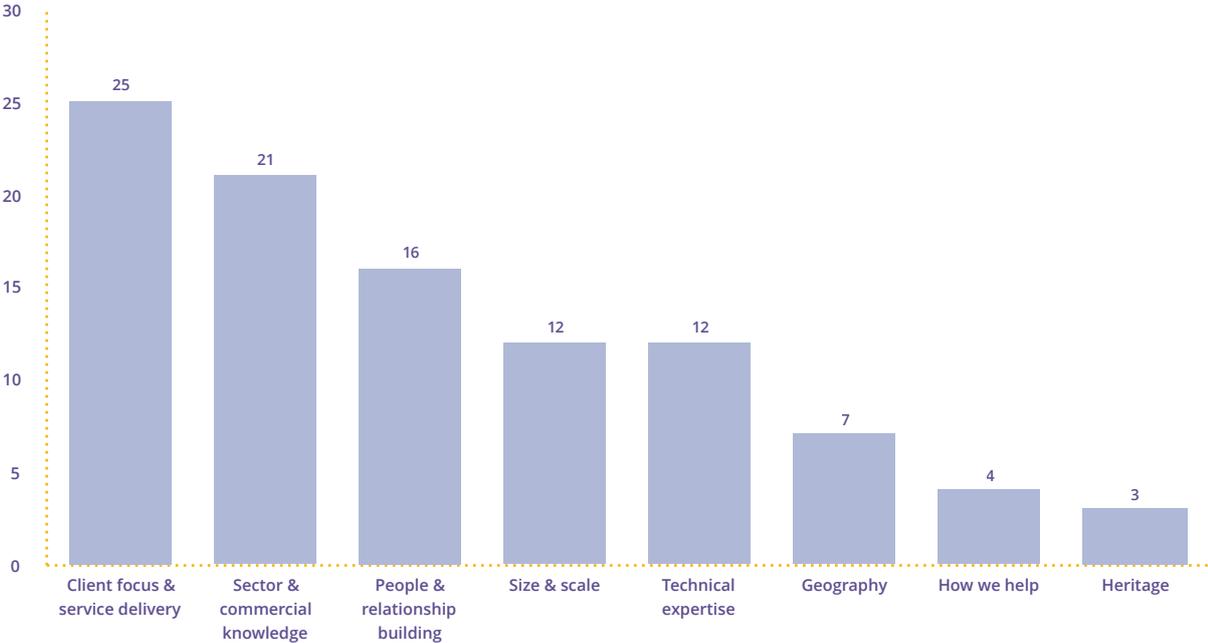
**Full service**

**Number of people**

Some of the things that law firm marketing focuses on are sensible. Of course clients want their lawyers to understand their sector, deliver a great service and be good to work with.

However, what law firms say about these things are clichés and general platitudes that have little or no substance. Because everyone says the same things, they've become white noise that clients and prospects tune out from.

**% of marketing content devoted to each message - all firms**



# Being distinctive.

## From the inside out

Your values are the DNA of what makes you distinctive, so what you communicative externally needs to be consistent with what you're doing and saying internally. However, there's a clear mismatch between the types of values that law firms have and their marketing messages.

'Client focus & service commitment' values talk about exceeding client expectations and being committed to their success. Client focus & service delivery marketing messages are about delivering services consistently across borders, offices and practices. Similar headings, but very different meanings.

While sector & commercial knowledge and people & relationship building are the second and third most popular types of marketing message for law firms, 'commerciality' and 'building relationships' rank only seven and eight out of nine as values. While 'people & respect' is the second most popular value type, what it means is investing in talent and treating colleagues with mutual respect.

'Innovation', 'professionalism & integrity' and 'teamwork' are three of the top five values

but they hardly feature at all in law firm marketing.

Law firms are saying one thing internally and something else externally. This disconnect is clear and dangerous.

Firms are telling their people to behave in one way and

promising clients they'll receive something very different.

They tell clients that sector & commercial knowledge and relationship building are two of the most important things.

But they tell their people they're two of the least important.

### Top five types of values

#### Client focus & service commitment

#### People & respect

#### Innovation

#### Professionalism & integrity

#### Teamwork

### Top five types of marketing messages

#### Client focus & service delivery

#### Sector & commercial knowledge

#### People & relationship building

#### Size & scale

#### Technical quality

## Uncovering & articulating

Being distinctive isn't about having a great idea. It's about a process of discovery, about discovering and then articulating something that people haven't noticed. Ask yourself three questions about your firm - what do people know? What don't they know? What should they know?

First, what you articulate needs to be relevant to the markets you're in, the clients you work with and the work you do. It's intrinsically linked to your strategy, about where and how you want to compete. It needs to be important to the people you're selling to, otherwise they won't be interested in it.

Second, it needs to be authentic. For your people to consistently think and behave in a certain way it has to feel real, otherwise they won't do it. If you want your people to go out and talk about it they have to believe it. If they don't, you'll be found out. It's much easier to believe in

something that's real than something that isn't.

Last, it needs to be distinctive. Whatever you say cannot be timid, bland, boring or half-hearted. Articulate it in as simple and straightforward a way as possible – ideally a word, statement or phrase. Contrast, don't compare. Be bold and confident. The whole point is to stand out.

## Saying what you do & doing what you say

Having uncovered and articulated how you're distinctive, you need to embed it and communicate it relentlessly and consistently, both internally and externally. The objective is to make your 10% mean more than your 90%. The diagram opposite shows how to do this. Think about it as saying what you do and doing what you say.

## Saying what you do and doing what you say



# End.

## The case for distinctiveness

Who are you? What do you stand for? What's your purpose? Who are you for? What's your proposition to the market? These are the critical questions facing law firms today. To answer them law firms need to uncover and articulate how they are distinctive.

A major part of being distinctive is, of course, about winning work by offering clients a more compelling proposition. However, that's only part of it. We need to stop thinking that it's just about marketing and the domain of marketing professionals only.

Being distinctive is ultimately about your strategy and your DNA. It goes to the heart of who you are and what you want to be. It requires investment of time and effort from law firm leaders.

Without that it will fail. With that it can be a hugely powerful tool for transforming the entire business.

A business that wins new clients and turns them into loyal clients, has collegiate and committed people who use their time effectively, makes good decisions quickly and spends money wisely is a business that will be successful. But it can only become those things if it understands and communicates what it is that makes it distinctive.

Nobody buys a car because it's exactly the same as all the others they test drove. Nobody buys a house because it's exactly the same as all the others they looked at. Nobody instructs a law firm because they're exactly the same as all the other ones they spoke to. Be distinctive.

# About the author.

Lee Grunnell helps professional firms articulate, communicate and demonstrate how they're distinctive.

The former marketing director of three law firms, he's seen first hand the ways firms are the same and the ways they're different. Having spoken to hundreds of clients he understands how distinctive and persuasive they find the things firms say. He's also worked with all kinds of partners to deliver business critical pieces of work including mergers, rebrands and strategy.

He's spent his entire career in professional services marketing, also working for one of the big four accountancy firms. He's also the London region director for PM Forum, the not-for-profit group providing insight and inspiration to professional marketers.

Thirteen.Be.Distinctive.