

Like a Virgin.

How, not what

One or many?

One of the main reasons law firms struggle to define any genuine sense of distinctiveness is the difficulty of bringing together so many different practices under one roof. Or so they say. How can we possibly articulate one core message about who we are when we do so many different things for so many different people?

Of course, there must be a reason why different lawyers doing different things for different people congregate in the same business; if there wasn't, they'd join another firm or go off on their own and form little boutiques. But how do you balance the needs of the individual, the practice and the firm in a way that's both consistent and flexible?

Not by looking within the law.

Like a Virgin.

Virgin is an anomaly. If I asked you what business you admire, or who comes to mind when you think of a successful business, what would you say? Apple? Coca Cola? IKEA? Innocent? John Lewis? Mercedes? Microsoft? Pret a Manger? Starbucks? Vodafone?

The one thing all these organisations have in common is that they all do one thing. They provide a single type of service and product, or operate in a single sector. Retail. Telecoms. IT. Automobiles. Consumer products. Food and drink.

Virgin has a policy of active diversification. Gyms, internet services, trains, holidays, banking, planes, television, telecoms. But why are they in so many different industries? And how have they managed to be successful in each when the prevailing logic is to focus on one thing that you're good at?

The answer lies in their brand and values.

Brand ties.

Virgin is one of the most brand-led organisations in the world. Their core brand message is 'consumer champion'. Their mission is to improve the life of the consumer. Supporting this they have six brand values:

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| 1. Fun | Be wacky but not irresponsible |
| 2. Value for money | Be simple and clear, but never cheap |
| 3. Quality | Pay attention to detail, but don't be expensive for the sake of it |

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| 4. Innovation | Be willing to take risks |
| 5. Competitive challenge | Respond to customer needs |
| 6. Brilliant customer service | Hire empowered and professional people |

Virgin will enter any industry where customer service is key, their brand and mission is relevant and they can apply at least four of their six values. Oh, and the idea can be explained on one side of A4.

What on first glance appears to be a completely random business model is actually planned, thought through and defined entirely by the Virgin brand and values framework.

Takeaway.

What should law firms take from the Virgin way? Here are the headlines:

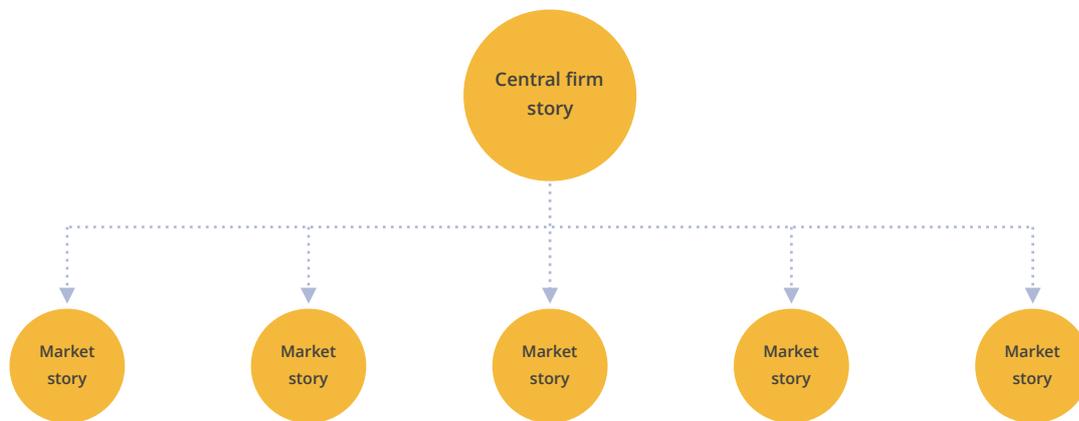
1. The 'consumer champion' idea is about the how, not the what. Virgin haven't defined themselves by what they do or what industry they're in. For law firms their brand message shouldn't be about being an insurance firm or telecoms firm, or about being known for litigation or commercial work
2. Virgin have a clear purpose that governs what they do and how they do things. They know why they exist and what their purpose is. Virgin are here to improve the life of the consumer. Can law firms articulate a similarly clear sense of why they exist?
3. Their values aren't just words. Each has a short description that explains what fun, value for money or innovation means. How many law firms are able to describe professionalism, integrity, quality or excellence?
4. Their brand, mission and values mean something. They aren't just fluff that lives in a drawer. Virgin use them to define their entire business strategy, including what markets they will and won't go into. Imagine if a law firm decided what sectors to be in according to their brand and mission.

In practice.

So how do you build a framework where everything you do is led by your core identity? For a law firm the ideal model looks something like this:

You need a central firm story because there are people that want to know about your firm as a whole. The business world, the legal press, potential recruits, potential merger partners. The objective is to articulate the 10% of the firm that's distinctive, not the 90% of the firm that's the same as your competitors.

For people who need to know about the business as a whole



Specific sales stories tailored to each market

Your mission. Your values. Your marketing messages. They all sit here. And whatever you say needs to be RAD: relevant, authentic and distinctive.

Then take that firm story and tweak it so it's specifically relevant to the different markets you're in. It might be the telecoms, insurance or energy sector. It might be your commercial, litigation or employment practice.

Which of your values and marketing messages are most relevant to each sector or practice? What makes the biggest different to clients in each? Work out which parts of your firm story you need to turn the volume up on or turn the volume down on.

Then deliver those stories and messages relentlessly and consistently through every platform; bids and tenders; marketing materials; meetings with clients and prospects; website content; directory submissions; interviews with the press; brochures; credentials statements; networking; sponsorship.

To finish, return to Virgin as the consumer champion. Their mission gives them a simple and straightforward purpose that binds everyone together and informs what they will and won't do. Will it help them improve the life of the consumer? Yes? Do it. No? Don't bother.

Equally, for one of their businesses fun might be the most important marketing message. For another it might be innovation. Value for money might be the critical message in another.

They're able to flex their message according to the audience, but it's always within a consistent and defined framework that links back to their central story and who they are as a business.

None of this should be difficult for a law firm. However, it does take rigour and discipline. Most importantly, it starts from the inside out.

Thirteen.Be.Distinctive.