

Of law firms & legal businesses.

To the victor the spoils

Ch ch ch ch changes.

Everybody knows the legal world is changing. Consolidation. Fragmentation. Technology. External investment. Insourcing. Outsourcing. On-call resourcing. Debates about structure. In the press this is often played out as Big Law vs. New Law, which oversimplifies things markedly. This isn't VHS vs. Betamax. It isn't either or.

Yes, there will eventually be fewer 'traditional' law firms. But the end result will be a mix of lots of different options. This can only be good for everyone. More choice. More variety. This should drive competition and innovation, leading to a better service and better value for the client. Which is what it's all about.

But where do these changes leave the traditional firm that doesn't want to be radically different? How should they compete?

The law firm of today & yesterday.

Once upon a time the world of law was simple and looked like this:



Law firms had clients and provided them with legal advice as and when required. That's all they were expected to do. Client relationships were passed down through the generations and when a client came to a firm they rarely left. The idea of patronage prevailed.

Technical expertise was the only thing that mattered. Then, as the clients grew and expanded, the law firm grew and expanded with them. As firms realised they needed to do something else to stand out they started talking about things like sector and commercial expertise; they said that differentiation existed not in the services they delivered but in the way they delivered them.

We can see this in today's law firm marketing. 80% of the the marketing from the top 100 UK law firms is concentrated in just five messages. They are, in descending order of popularity:

1. Client focus and service delivery
2. Sector & commercial knowledge
3. People & relationship building
4. Size & scale

5. Technical expertise

We've arrived at a point where all firms, with very few exceptions, look exactly the same and say exactly the same thing. For example, I recently asked 450 in-house lawyers and procurement specialists how distinctive they find law firm pitches:

How distinctive are the claims law firms make about how they're different?



Something needs to change.

The legal business of tomorrow.

If that's how things look today, how should they look tomorrow? Based on conversations I've had with the people who buy legal services, here's a suggestion:



The guiding purpose for the modern legal business will be to help their customers become more successful as individuals, teams and businesses.

How could it do this? In four ways.

1. Thought leadership is a term that's been used and abused by law firms. Most of what they produce under this banner is nothing of the sort. So what will the real thought leadership created by the legal business of the future do?

It will look forwards rather than backwards. Most law firm content looks at what has happened - case developments, changes in legislation etc. A customer once told me that she wanted thought leadership to “tell me what the risks of the future are going to be”.

It will start with a hypothesis. Thought leadership is not a survey; it doesn't ask to borrow your watch to tell you the time. Thought leadership starts with a proposition that is tested through research. It tells people what will happen in the future and how they should prepare for it now.

Linked to the point above, it will offer a point of view. Anybody can find facts and statistics. What customers want is a personal view on what those facts and statistics mean and what they should do because of them. This is where humans beat AI.

It will start new conversation. Good thought leadership explores something that hasn't been explored before or, at the very least, offers a new perspective on existing conversations. What don't people know? What should they know? Good thought leadership answers these questions.

2. Today's law firm possesses huge volumes of customer data, which it hardly uses at all. Data about its customers' matters, cases, projects and deals. Data about its customers' competitors' cases, projects and deals.

How long does it take customers to move through the different stages of their work? How much does each stage cost? Where do delays occur? How can delays be removed? Critically, how do they compare to their peers in these areas? The legal business of the future will use data to tell their customers how they can improve their systems and processes, save time and save money.

3. At the core of the legal business of the future will be, of course, the provision of legal advice. However, it will be delivered in a much more efficient way. The legal business of the future will use systems and processes within a project management framework.

There will be quality assurance processes to ensure consistency and efficiency. This will enable work to be done more quickly and make it much easier to set accurate budgets for work.

4. Most law firms already offer training of one sort or another. However, much of this training is academic and focused on legal updates. The legal business of the future will help train customers on much more, with the focus on how they can help their customer be more successful as an individual, as well as a business

Other than knowing what the law says, what else do in-house lawyers, HR directors, estates directors, CEOs and CFOs, small business owners, entrepreneurs and claims directors need to know? How can they do their jobs more effectively? These are the things the legal business of the future will help its customers achieve through training.

Be distinctive.

So how would you market the legal business of the future? Well you could say that you're an international law firm with offices in all major business sectors, or a national law firm with significant strength in depth.

But let's look outside of the law for a moment. When Walt Disney started in business he didn't talk about making cartoons. His mission was crystal clear - to "make people happy". In time this grew to encompass cartoons, films, theme parks and toys.

Similarly with Google. They don't talk about being a search engine. They wanted to "organise the world's information and make it universally accessible". This has taken them in various successful and profitable directions.

So to the legal business of the future. You could say that you provide legal services that help customers perform better as individuals, teams and businesses. If you wanted you could drop the 'provide legal services' bit. If you wanted to be really brave and distinctive you could just say you help business perform better.

And how do you do this? How about by helping your customers:

- Prepare for the future by providing genuine thought leadership on the issues that you need to know about in your key markets.
- Save time and money in your legal and business processes through data analysis and benchmarking you against relevant peers and competitors.
- Deliver legal projects, cases and work more quickly and efficiently through effective project management and more accurate budgeting.
- Perform more effectively as individuals and teams by providing technical and commercial training on legal and business issues.

Who wouldn't be interested in that? Doesn't it sound more persuasive than talking about where you have offices, how many top tier directory rankings you have or how you build lasting relationships that go beyond individual transactions.

You could probably even charge a premium for it...

Thirteen.Be.Distinctive.