

Think. Feel. Do.

Making law firm pitches more persuasive

Story

1. Start
2. Think
3. Feel
4. Do
5. Improve
6. End

Start.

To persuade or not persuade?

Too long. Insufficient focus. Too many standard CVs and hourly rates. The same, standard boilerplate rhetoric.

Propositions that aren't relevant. A lack of interest in and understanding of the client's business.

These are some of the things in-house lawyers and procurement specialists said when asked what they really think and feel about the pitches they're presented with. Too often clients feel that they're reading a standard firm brochure rather than something that's been written just for them and their needs.

The most worrying thing about the lack of persuasiveness amongst law firm pitches is the disconnect between what law firms think clients want to hear, and what clients actually want to hear. As a consequence, what firms do say is therefore not just generic, it's often irrelevant.

There are two things that law firms need to think about. First, a basic need to improve the quality and relevance of the pitches they produce across all aspects of content, look and feel.

Second, a need to understand, at a strategic level, their market proposition and what makes them distinctive. Without this, their pitches will always fail.

Think. Feel. Do. will provide the detail about where law firms are currently falling down with their pitches. It will explore what clients think about the language and visuals that firms use, as well as the claims they make about how they're different and the propositions that firms offer.

It will explain how firms can make their pitches more distinctive and, consequently, more persuasive. It will get to the detail of what clients want to see more of and less of, as well as the words and phrases they wish law firms would stop using.

Some law firms are well accustomed to formal panel review processes and have been responding to invitations to tender for years. For other firms, the idea of ITTs, RFPs and RFIs is a new phenomenon. Whatever sort of firm you are, formal pitching for work is on the rise and will continue to become more competitive.

There's a clear opportunity for law firms to win more work if they can make their pitches more distinctive. This an opportunity that they can't afford to miss.

The problem isn't that law firms can't do what their clients want. More often than not firms are better than their pitches; they have more insightful and relevant things to say, but need to be braver about saying them.

What would you like to see more of in law firm pitches?

"Genuine interest in our business"

What are the words and phrases you wish law firms would stop using?

"Commercial"

Think.

Who's who? What clients really think about law firm pitches

What do in-house lawyers and procurement specialists really think of law firm pitches? Overall, they're not impressed. They think they're unfocused, generic and filled with irrelevant content and clichéd marketing speak.

All law firms sound the same. They even sound the same when they're claiming to be different, both with the general messages they give and the specific language they use.

When asked how distinctive they find the claims law firms make about how they're different, nearly 75% of respondents gave a score of 3 or lower. No-one gave a score higher than 6. The average response from both the in-house legal and procurement community and was just 3.

What would you like to see less of in law firm pitches?

“Generic marketing speak”

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



2. How distinctive is the language law firms use in their pitches?



In their own words. Four more things clients would like to see more of:

-
- Tailoring**
-
- Innovation**
-
- Genuine value add they can bring to the table**
-
- Focus**
-

“Understanding your sector and business”. “Combining technical expertise with a commercial approach”. “Building personal relationships that go beyond individual transactions”. “Our unique culture and approach to service delivery”. “The way we work with you”. “The highest standards of technical expertise”. “An unswerving commitment to quality”. “Becoming your trusted adviser”.

These are some of the typical things law firms say about what sets them apart. Clients are constantly presented with a blizzard of marketing white noise. When asked how distinctive they find the language that law firms use in their pitches, over 90% of respondents gave a score of 5 or lower. Almost 80% gave a score of 3 or lower. Again the average response was just 3.

Firms have tried to make their pitches stand out. However, they’ve focused on look and feel rather than content.

This is the area where in-house lawyers and procurement specialists gave the most varied responses. It’s also the area where law firm pitches score the highest, suggesting their efforts have made a difference.

When asked how distinctive they find the visual style used in law firms pitches, 54% gave a score of 6 or higher while 46% gave a score of 5 or lower.

It’s clear law firms still have a long way to go to make their pitches more distinctive and, as a consequence, more persuasive. At their worst, the only thing that distinguishes one firm from another is their logo and branding.

75% of respondents would find it difficult to identify a law firm from their pitch if their name and branding was removed. In this area procurement are more critical than their legal counterparts.

What would you like to see more of in law firm pitches?

“Answering the questions they were asked rather than the questions they wished they were asked”

What would you like to see less of in law firm pitches?

“Boilerplate responses”

3. How distinctive is the visual style that law firms use in their pitches?



4. How easy would it be for you to identify a law firm from their pitch if the name and branding was removed?



Feel.

How special do law firm pitches make clients feel?

Clients want to feel that they're reading a pitch that has been written just for them. They want the law firm to tell them - specifically - how they will solve their problem, manage their transaction or deliver their project.

They want to hear about the know-how the firm will pool to offer a solution to their needs. They want to see the team that will support them and what relevant experience they will bring. They want to know how much it will cost, how the price is made up and what they will get for their money.

Clients don't want a brochure. They don't want to read generic marketing rhetoric telling them about the law firm, what they

do and who they work with. They don't need to read pages and pages of historic deals. They don't want to see standard CVs that have been copied and pasted from a previous bid. Too often, however, this is what clients are presented with.

75% of respondents gave a score of 5 or lower when asked how often they read a pitch that makes them feel that it's been written specifically for them and their requirements. The average response from both procurement and legal was 5 - not very high.

One of the main problems with law firm pitches is boilerplate. First, it's easy to see. Second, it looks the same from one law firm to another.

When asked how easy it is to spot generic boilerplate, all respondents gave a score of 5 or lower. Almost 75% gave a score of 3 or lower. The average response was just 3.

What would you like to see more of in law firm pitches?

“Using their experience to give me a solution”

What would you like to see less of in law firm pitches?

“Lots of marketing stuff that's irrelevant to the tender”

What words and phrases do you wish law firms would stop using?

“We understand your business - when they patently don't”

5. How often do you read a pitch that makes you feel it's been written specifically for you and your requirements?



6. How easy is it for you to spot generic boilerplate content that's been copied and pasted into a pitch?



Distinctive + relevant = persuasive

The preponderance of boilerplate has wiped out distinctiveness in law firm pitches almost entirely. In-house lawyers and procurement specialists say that law firms hardly ever present them with propositions that are genuinely distinctive compared to other firms.

Everyone gave a score of 5 or lower when asked how often law firms present them with genuinely distinctive propositions; almost 70% gave a score of 3 or lower. The average response again was just 3.

Compounding this, what law firms do say about why they're different is not always relevant to the client. Neither distinctive nor relevant is a dangerous place for a law firm to be.

According to clients, a key reason for this is that firms don't genuinely understand what the client wants or what they're looking for. Too often firms don't know what problem it is they're trying to solve.

When asked how relevant they find the claims law firms make about how they're different, almost 75% of respondents gave a score of 5 or lower. The average response was 4.

7. How often do law firms present propositions that are genuinely distinctive compared to other firms?



8. How relevant are the claims law firms make about how they're different?



In their own words. Four more things clients would like to see less of:

Boilerplate rhetoric

Hourly rates details

Long CV style experience notes

Waffle

What would you like to see less of in law firm pitches?

“Standard CVs”

Do.

Risk and opportunity - getting the result you want

Reviewing pitches isn't fun and clients have a muted response to the pitches they're presented with. However, those pitches are just as likely to damage their perception of a firm as they are to improve their perception of a firm. As it stands, law firms are on a knife edge with their pitches.

Law firms clearly have much work to do to improve the quality of their pitches and make them more persuasive. However, the prize for doing so is significant.

9. How often do pitch documents improve your perception of a law firm?



10. How often do pitch documents damage your perception of a law firm?



What words and phrases do you wish law firms would stop using?

“Strategic”

What would you like to see less of in law firm pitches?

“Previous triumphs for other clients”

What would you like to see more of in law firm pitches?

“Tailored to the client's specific requirements”

How likely is it that law firms would improve their chances of winning more work if their pitches are more distinctive? The average response to this question from both in-house lawyers and procurement experts was 7, revealing two things.

First, if law firms make their pitches more distinctive, they're highly likely to reap the benefits. Second, the procurement community is just as convinced as their in-house legal peers. Perhaps they're not as solely focused on cost as everyone thinks.

Overall, 50% of respondents gave a score of 7 and a further 25% scored 8.

The remaining 25% responded with a 5 or 6. Law firms can't lose by making their pitches more distinctive. Everyone thinks they're more likely, rather than less likely, to increase their chances of winning work by doing so.

11. How likely is it that law firms would improve their chances of winning more work if their pitches are more distinctive?



Five features all great pitches share:

They're short

They're about the client, not the firm

They focus on the impact the firm will have

You can't see the boilerplate

They read as if they're written by one person

What would you like to see more of in law firm pitches?

"Pre-work i.e. they've thought about how an issue affects us specifically"

Improve.

How are you going to win this pitch?

A pitch is the ultimate piece of persuasive writing. You want the client to think that you'll do a better job for them than anyone else. You want them to feel that you understand what they want, that you've invested the time and effort to put together a bid that is just for them. And what do you want them to do? You want them to instruct you on their job or appoint you to their panel.

In their own words. Four more things clients would like to see more of:

.....

Details of who will actually be doing the work

.....

Clarity in commercial propositions

.....

Specific applicability to my business

.....

Evidence they understand what we want

.....

What's the big IDEA?

A pitch isn't a brochure. The purpose of pitching isn't to tell the client about you or what you do. It's to tell the client what impact you'll have on their business and how you'll deliver it. There's generally good content somewhere in a law firm pitch. However, it's often buried underneath too much boilerplate rhetoric and clients miss it.

IDEA is a simple model to help get the structure of pitch content right. It can be applied to the whole pitch, individual sections or specific questions.

The 10 point checklist opposite will help make your pitch as distinctive and persuasive as possible.

1. Impact

What impact will you have on the client and their business? Will you help them to reduce risk, improve their efficiency or enter a new market? Will you save them time or money or make their life easier? Lead with the outcomes that you'll deliver — because this is what the client's most interested in.

2. Delivery

Having established what you'll deliver, explain how you'll deliver it. What tools and processes will you use? Who'll be on the team? What role will they play? This is when to talk about extranets, online tools, project plans, client service standards and key performance indicators.

3. Evidence

The client needs to trust that you can deliver what you say you will, so evidence is crucial. Case studies need to relate directly to examples of when you've delivered a similar impact for similar clients. Other evidence might be awards, testimonials, rankings or data and information that you've collected.

4. Advocates

Don't think about referees, think about advocates. Who'll be the strongest advocates of your suitability for this particular pitch? Who's been in a similar position to this client and can vouch most strongly for you in this situation? They're the people to pick.

Action	Done?
<p>1 Take out the clichés</p> <p>Make a list of your personal 'lazy words'. Read the whole pitch, replacing or removing your chosen clichés.</p>	
<p>2 Shorten it...</p> <p>Actively read every sentence. Does it add to or convey your chosen message? If not, take it out.</p>	
<p>3 ... and make it easy for the reader</p> <p>Set yourself some limits - number of words in a sentence or lines in a paragraph. Edit your document to stick to your limits.</p>	
<p>4 Remember your IDEA</p> <p>Check every question against the IDEA model. Mark I(mpact), D(elivery), E(vidence) and A(dvocates) in the margin, and check each answer has all four.</p>	
<p>5 Use case studies properly</p> <p>Take out any experience padding. Read each example given and ask if it's specifically relevant to the client. Does it show that your chosen delivery method delivers the desired impact? If not, take it out.</p>	
<p>6 Tailor CVs</p> <p>Check each CV carefully. Does it clearly state the person's role and show evidence of performing a similar role before? If not, amend it. If you can't, question why they're there and / or take them out.</p>	
<p>7 Be clear with financials</p> <p>Did your pricing change halfway through the process? If so, check it still supports your strategy. Have you fudged any part your pricing or assumptions or said that you're 'happy to discuss'? Clarify - clients can spot woolliness.</p>	
<p>8 Make sure your value adds actually add value</p> <p>State your client's perception of value in one sentence - do your offerings meet that desire? Do they work for you? If you win, can you actually deliver what you've promised?</p>	
<p>9 Pick referees carefully</p> <p>Are your chosen referees relevant or just your usual ones? Have they had a similar experience to the client to whom you're bidding? If not, find a better one. Even better, tell the client why you've chosen that referee. Have you briefed the referee? If not, brief them.</p>	
<p>10 Get feedback</p> <p>Get agreement now from the team about how feedback will be obtained - and stick to the plan.</p>	

End.

Be distinctive

It's clear from what clients have said that distinctiveness is in short supply when it comes to law firm pitches. However, it's also clear what firms need to do to stand out. More than that, the prize on offer to firms making their pitches more distinctive and persuasive is huge.

In a world where all (or virtually all) law firms say and do the same thing, it's little wonder that price has become such a determining factor for clients running tender exercises. Law firms have arguably made price the only differentiator. How else are clients supposed to choose between one firm and another?

This is not the fault of marketing and BD teams. The issue goes right to the heart of firm strategy and identity.

There are, of course, practical things that can be done to improve the quality, distinctiveness and persuasiveness of law firm pitches.

What do clients want to see less of? Boilerplate rhetoric; generic marketing speak; previous triumphs for other clients; standard CVs; hourly rates; and long CV-style experience notes.

What do clients want to see more of? Focus; specific applicability to the client's business; clarity in commercial propositions; genuine value add the firm can bring to the table; evidence they understand what the client wants; details of who will actually be doing the work; succinctness; answering the questions asked rather than the questions firms wish were asked.

None of this should be difficult to do. However, without a consistent and relevant story to tell about their purpose, what they stand for and their market proposition, a law firm's pitches will always be hampered.

Law firms need to work harder to uncover and articulate how they're distinctive. Only when they've done that will they be able to communicate it persuasively through their pitches and other marketing materials.

The only question is - how much effort are they willing to invest to win the work that will follow?

What would you like to see more of in law firm pitches?

"Succinctness"

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.