

## Identifying your brand

By Dana Zivkovich

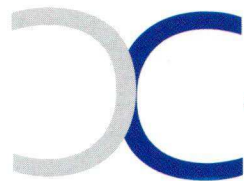
**T**he importance of branding has been steadily growing in the legal profession for a long time and continues to influence decisions about how to compete in the marketplace. In general, Indiana maintains a conservative position on attorney advertising, slowly but carefully unfolding permissible parameters for attorneys to follow to balance advertising with consumer protection. In such an environment, identifying your brand and projecting it outside of traditional advertising methods is a subtle but effective way to attract potential clients. How much thought have you given to your personal brand? Can you identify your brand? Are your actions consistent with the message you intend to project? These

are some of the questions on which this article reflects.

When we think of other people, it is easy to recognize our impressions of them. You have likely developed a feeling about a person based on an accumulation of impressions. The way someone presents him or herself, maintains his or her composure, dresses, speaks, writes and opines and a multitude of other characteristics meld together to form an overall impression that lodges in your mind about that person. We are familiar with these traits about ourselves intuitively. This is your brand.

Much of our impressions about others are based on judgments we make as a result of our own stylistic opinions. This

analysis is a basic psychological function used to make decisions. For example, you may determine a set of circumstances is suspicious, and that determination is based on your predisposition about certain facts. If you didn't have those predisposed feelings, you might not recognize a potentially dangerous situation. From childhood, we learn to have impressions about everything. This same function continues throughout adulthood, though in a much more sophisticated way. When potential clients are looking to hire an attorney, they are looking for a basis to call on someone. It is your branding that is the most influential. Whether you are recommended by another person or a website or a search engine result, the



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potential client is evaluating you based on available information.

Branding is so influential because people are receptive to being around other people with whom they can relate. A satisfying relationship is one where both individuals feel a communication connection. However, to be heard and understood can be challenging. We have all heard of, and potentially been involved in, relationships with clients where someone does not feel heard or understood and the relationship breaks down. Managing relationships is not within the scope of this article; rather, the time just prior to relationship formation is the focus. This is when your brand has the most influence on a potential client's decision to engage you. Your brand projects to others about your ability to communicate. When a potential client feels your ability to communicate with him or her is strong, he or she has a sense of comfort and trust begins to form.

Have you thought about yourself in terms of your personal brand? What word or couple of words do you want to project? Reflection about what you naturally project to others is a key first step in identifying your brand. You are a cluster of numerous adjectives, but human nature is to summarize. The strongest traits about you are likely to be the ones people are left with after a first impression. Personality traits, even if somewhat filtered in professional contexts, are strong indicators of your personal brand. This is a great way to enhance your strengths as an individual. Consider how your natural personality traits can connect with your target market.

Start by testing your own impression of yourself. Write down the top five words you feel describe your personality. Ask five to eight of your closest friends to do the same for you, without telling them the details about why you're asking; a short explanation that you are doing an exercise in business development will encourage your friends to be candid in their replies. Try to select individuals who do not know each other. If all responses match, you

have a good indicator of which personality traits you naturally project. It's an interesting experiment to see whether your friends' replies match your own or each other's. If only one or two words match, this is the foundation of your brand. Consider whether these words reflect certain values you want to project professionally. Depending on your practice areas and your target clientele, some values may take precedence over others.

The next step is connecting the dots of data. Construct the impression you want to make around your natural tendencies. Consistency and coordination strengthen your brand. Visually, your brand can be reflected in your attire, your briefcase or bag, your hairstyle, your tone of voice, your speech, your writing, your office organization and decor, office stationery (particularly if you are a solo), your website and even your employees. For example, office procedures you implement may require higher than average standards of courtesy, or office attire may reflect an office environment that is

more or less casual. Consistency comes naturally because you are working with characteristics you already project.

Finding your self-worth as a human being is tremendously important when developing your brand and projecting it to others. It is easy to tie your self-worth to your employment productivity and your occupation because we spend so much time investing our efforts in that capacity. However, your brand and your value are determined by who you are, not what you do. The brand comes from the inside out. Introspection is the starting point for crafting your brand around your natural strengths. From there you can create a clear and concise message that connects you with your target market in a relatable way ultimately leading to a mutually satisfying relationship. 

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