

A Shorter Firm Name Might Be Better in the Long Run

The Theory

Think back to your early school years – you learned to string several words together to form a sentence; you recited simple nursery rhymes; you worked to memorize your seven-digit telephone number. As children, we began with simple subjects because of the basic principles of psychology – the shorter the string of words, the easier they are to remember. These principles underlie decades old advertising principles that are still standards today.

What's in a name like Coca-Cola, Microsoft, Disney, McDonald's, Marlboro, BMW or Gap? Each name contains just one to four syllables. Each is a global brand. And each has value of greater than \$1 billion. Now, say the name of your law firm aloud! Does your corporate identity fit the bill?

Effective naming is likely the single most important tactic to achieve effective corporate branding.

The Trend

From small boutique shops to century-old organizations, law firms across Philadelphia and the country are changing their names to better brand their organizations and draw greater name recognition to their services. These shorter names are more memorable, catchy and distinctive and do not necessarily abandon the long-standing disciplinary rules and tradition of using partners' names as the law firm brand.

The Pennsylvania Disciplinary Rules of Professional Conduct, the longtime authority on law firm names, states:

"a firm may be designated by the names of all or some of its members, by the names of deceased members where there has been a continuing succession in the firm's identity or by a trade name such as the 'ABC Legal Clinic'." (Comment 1, Rule 7.5).

Firms are free to shorten their names by either reducing the number of surnames used or inventing a trade name, and there are compelling reasons to do so.

So why adopt a shorter name?

There are myriad objectives and advantages to this corporate branding strategy. Shorter law firm names are easier to remember and repeat. A short name supports name recognition, corporate branding and a healthy referral pipeline. Shorter names also work much better with the emerging technologies that firms need to adopt to remain competitive in today's legal environment.

The Trailblazers

Some of the area's most well known law firms are among the movers and shakers in the Philadelphia region. Today's reality is that they and all firms are vying for a bigger piece of the pie in a narrowing legal marketplace. Many are adopting overall marketing and public relations strategies to remain more competitive. Some focus on niche marketing like Kimmel & Silverman's "Lemon Law" practice, others concentrate on publicity and media relations like Sheller, Ludwig & Badey (seen on CNN, The Today Show, Good Morning American, Law Journal TV, among many others), and still others upgrade their corporate names and identities — all to improve today's communications challenges in a market saturated with TV ads, billboards and directory listings.

As recent as January 2, 2003, the Philadelphia-based law firm of Blank Rome Comisky & McCauley LLP officially changed its name to Blank Rome LLP. Other prominent Philadelphia firms began shortening their names as early as 1999. Stradely Ronon Stevens & Young emerged "Stradley Ronon" and Pepper Hamilton & Sheetz adopted "Pepper Hamilton."

Among other trendsetters are "Dechert," formerly Dechert Price & Rhoads, "ReedSmith," formerly Reed Smith Shaw & McClay, and "Saul Ewing," formerly Saul Ewing, Remick & Saul.

These firms have created brands that consumers, companies and referring counsel alike can more easily identify and recall. These brands differentiate the firms from the masses. And rumor has it that there are many other nationally known firms in the Philadelphia region either evaluating their corporate names or following suite with a shorter name brand strategy.

The Truth

While shorter is not necessarily better, several key principles of branding (and human cognition) make short names a compelling choice for many firms.

Shorter law firm names are easier to remember and repeat.

Words or phrases are memorable when they are short, distinct and to the point. Corporate brands like Disney and McDonald's are easily remembered, repeated and retained. The shorter the law firm name, the easier it will be to remember. If the name is easy to remember and

repeat, and stays with people for a long time, current clients will recall the firm more easily (leading to repeat business), potential clients will keep the firm name higher in their minds, and referring counsel can mention the name “off the top of their heads”. The name of the business development game is client acquisition and retention, so if the client or prospect can remember your firm name, the more likely you will get the call every time there is a legal question.

Shorter law firm names support name recognition and corporate branding.

Shorter company names should be adopted as a result of a much bigger communications/branding campaign. Because the shorter name is conducive to more effective branding, the renaming and the overall campaign leverage one another in consumer’s minds. The campaign puts the name “out there” and the easily recalled name helps the campaign succeed in attracting more business. The firm must first consider how it wants to be positioned in the marketplace. Then it must consider the strategy in support of the positioning. Once the plan is determined, the firm should then consider whether renaming the firm satisfies the strategy – because renaming should be a single tactic in a much bigger corporate communications plan.

Shorter law firm names work better with emerging technologies

Another advantage is that a shorter firm name is more effective with emerging technologies like the Internet. The firm’s Web site address needs to be easy to find, remember and type. It is much easier to type, find and revisit www.dechert.com as opposed to www.dechertpriceandrhoads.com.

Shortness is also a virtue in the world of search engine marketing (SEM), which is also known as search engine optimization. Search engines can be compared to libraries. In order for your book (company) to be found in the library (search engine), the book must first be placed in the library and then indexed properly in the card index to be found. Books with short names are more likely to be properly indexed and easily found by library patrons. The same holds true for search engines. Companies with short names are easier to accurately index with the major search engines, such as Google, Yahoo!, AOL, etc., so that your name comes up prominently when it is searched for. Although this is only one of many search engine marketing tactics, it is an important part of the mix. For best results, your name should be specific, unique and short.

So the question remains, is this tactic right for your law firm?

The answer: maybe!

The decision to change a law firm name is a momentous one, that must take into consideration the history of the firm's name and the impact of change on current clients, referring counsel, associates and partners. Most importantly, the name change must support the overall marketing strategy.

When devising such a strategy, the firm must first consider how it wants to be positioned in the marketplace, and then formulate tactics to achieve this positioning. With the plan in place, the firm can determine whether renaming is an effective tactic.

Renaming is then, as it should be, a single tactic in a much bigger corporate communications plan. The plan determines how the name change will be communicated and what other tactics will support the endeavor (new logo design, tag line, Web site design, public relations efforts, etc.). The goal is business growth, and that is achieved by a successful transition to a well-branded, memorable name as part of an overall law firm communications campaign.

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