

Stretching Your Advertising Dollars

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Over the past ten years, many law firms have embarked on advertising campaigns to build brand awareness and shift perceptions of their firms. Although other tools can accomplish the same objectives, a strong advertising campaign is a fast and efficient way to build awareness and brand perception in a crowded market.

But because advertising is expensive, it is often one of the first expenditures to be cut when firms are faced with the kinds of market pressures that many are facing this year.

For firms that are *in extremis*, it makes sense to cut back on advertising. And those cutbacks actually present an opportunity for firms that can continue to invest in advertising. The advantages of advertising in this market are many, and there are a number of ways to ensure that your firm gets the most out of its advertising dollars by adopting best practices in media planning.

Why Should Your Firm Advertise During an Economic Downturn?

The concept is simple: if fewer people are advertising - and you can afford to be one of them - more people will pay attention to you.

One measurement of advertising effectiveness is share of voice. Share of voice measures your percentage share of the total advertising dollars spent in your market. Advertising is only effective if sufficient dollars are spent to have an impact.

When your competitors reduce their advertising spending, your share of voice goes up even if your spending stays the same. As your share of voice goes up, so does the impact of your advertising because there is less competition for your target market's attention.

For a very graphic and literal illustration of the extent to which your competitors have cut back on advertising, just compare the thickness of a legal or business trade publication in Q1 of 2009 vs. Q1 of 2008. The difference is palpable - recent publications are significantly thinner - suggesting that your competitors are cutting back drastically on their advertising budgets. If your firm can afford to continue to advertise in this market, you will reach your awareness and brand-building goals much faster.

If you advertise in this market, you will also have more buying power. Publishers are willing to hold the line on rates or even make rate reductions. Moreover, they will have more value-added services to offer because fewer firms will be taking advantage of them.

Examples of value-added opportunities publisher are willing to provide include exclusive conferences, access to mailing lists, and premium placement at no extra cost. These give law firms an opportunity to do more with the same money, or even cut the budget while achieving the same advertising weight.

Law firms that are interested in advertising should first consider the budget that will be required. The most effective advertising campaigns run for a period of years. Each year's budget must be sufficient to meet the media objectives. It is a waste of money to develop an advertising campaign that is not adequately supported financially and for which there is not a long-term commitment.

Start With a Sound Strategy and Strong Ads

If you decide to continue or even start advertising as your competitors are cutting back, there are a number of steps to ensure the best value is received for every advertising dollar. Developing a creative strategy that will lead to strong ads is the first step. This involves determining what you want to say about your firm to build your brand, and to whom you want to say it.

Effective advertising must communicate messages that are relevant and believable, and that differentiate the firm from competition. This process may require research among attorneys and clients, prospects, and potential recruits.

Once that process is complete, the strategy should be articulated in a written brief, called a "creative brief" because it guides the creative process. It describes the target market and the messages to be communicated in the advertising.

The creative brief is then translated by an experienced team of writers and artists into engaging visuals and text that communicate the strategy. Ideally, the advertising produced will have at its core an idea that can be executed in a wide variety of ways in multiple media.

Think of Absolut Vodka as an example. The advertising needs to be in keeping with the firm's culture, while being visually engaging and interesting to read. If no one notices the ads while leafing through a magazine, browsing through a Web site or walking through an airport, the advertising dollars are completely wasted.

Creating an Effective Media Plan: This May Include Hiring a Media Planner

The next step in developing effective advertising is to create a media plan that will determine where best to place the advertising to reach the target audience. Developing a media plan is a strategic discipline. Consider engaging an experienced outside media planner if one is not available in-house.

Experienced media planners understand how to translate advertising objectives into media objectives. For example, they will determine in how many outlets and how frequently the ads need to be seen. They will know which media outlets have the greatest potential to reach your target market. Media planners have relationships with magazine publishers and other media organizations as well as the skills to negotiate the best possible terms.

Moreover, they can generate creative placement ideas to showcase your advertising in unique ways, such as placing the ads adjacent to relevant editorial copy or ensuring that copies of the publications in which your ads appear are handed out at relevant conferences.

Even though hiring a media planner may seem like an unnecessary expense, a good planner can save you money by negotiating lower rates or by obtaining bonus ad placements. In today's market, many planners are no longer paid on commission; instead, they work independently from advertising agencies, and are paid an hourly rate, or a retainer. When using a planner who does not take a commission, the media outlet typically will give you a "net" rate if you request it, which means that the commission is removed. This alone can provide you with substantial savings.

Once you choose a planner, be sure to fully educate the person about your firm's vision and strategies, its current clients and most important prospects, its competition, and its advertising goals.

Make Your Firm a Priority

When hiring a media planner, be sure that your fees will be important relative to the planner's other billings so that you will be high on the planner's priority list. While law firms do not necessarily need to work with planners who have law firm experience, they should engage planners who have in-depth experience with a wide-range of business-to-business media vehicles.

Likewise, if the campaign will run overseas, you should hire a planner with experience in the overseas markets that you want to target.

If you hire a planner without a current law firm client, you may be able to achieve category exclusivity with the planner. This is ideal because he will be better able to negotiate advantageous rates and bonuses on your behalf and can devote all of his creative ideas to your firm. At the very least, be sure that the planner does not work with any of your direct competitors.

Define Media Objectives and Target Market

The next step in creating the plan is to define the media objectives and the role the media will play. Objectives may include building awareness of a firm that is not well known in a particular market, changing perceptions of the firm, educating the market about a new practice group or a merger, or some combination of the above. More tactical objectives could include directing clients to a new Web site or generating interest in a publication or an event.

An important component in developing the media plan is to define the target market so that advertising can be designed to reach the right audience. The main target market for law firm advertising is typically the potential buyers of the firm's legal services. Another primary or secondary market is potential recruits.

The target market should be defined as narrowly as possible so that the media planners can identify the best outlets to reach that market. For example, the target for a commercial litigation firm that serves large corporations might be the general counsels and their lieutenants at Fortune 500 companies. A corporate firm that is opening an office in a new market might define its target as partners in local law firms who are interested in making a lateral move.

Quantifying “Reach” and “Frequency” and Identifying Media Outlets

Once the media objectives and target market are defined, they are typically quantified in terms of “reach” and “frequency.” “Reach” goals are stated in terms of the percentage of your target you should reach for the ad to be effective. “Frequency” is defined in terms of the number of times your target must be exposed to the ad for it to have the desired impact. In a business-to-business context, the frequency is usually eight or more times. Various combinations of media outlets are evaluated in part on the basis of how well they meet your “reach” and “frequency” goals.

When these objectives have been determined, the next step is to identify the media outlets that can achieve the media objectives. For law firms, appropriate outlets include:

- Broad-reach business publications, including dailies, weeklies and monthlies;
- Narrow-reach business publications, including legal publications and vertical trade publications;
- Online business and vertical sites; and

- Out-of-home publications, including airports.

These vehicles are then prioritized by comparing circulation, coverage of the target market, editorial environment, and potential for added value. Once you have narrowed the list of potential media outlets, an RFP should be prepared that outlines your media objectives and requests financial proposals from media organizations. This will allow you to narrow the list further and build a detailed budget and plan.

Media proposals are typically evaluated based on:

- Quality of proposal. Is it responsive to the RFP; is it thoughtful, strategic and creative; do they really want your business?
- Exclusivity. Does the vehicle reach your target in an exclusive or superior manner vs. the competition?
- Price. Are they giving reasonable rate concessions given the volume of advertising?
- Added value. Does the proposal include premium positioning, participation in events that reach your target, or availability of mailing lists?
- Availability of information. Do they research their audience and provide feedback on advertising? Many publications provide this service by using outside research firms, such as Starch or Baxter, and some will allow the customer to add custom questions.

Once all of this information is available, you will be able to prioritize among the media outlets based on their ability to meet your “reach” and “frequency” goals in a cost-effective manner and with added-value incentives.

Best Practice: Concentrate Your Dollars

One important point to keep in mind as you develop your media plan: It is preferable to concentrate your dollars and build a strong buy within a few outlets. You will reach your target more effectively because the ads will have a greater presence in each publication. In addition, you will have more leverage for lower rates and strong placements with fewer outlets. The goal should be to work with the media outlets as business partners who will search for opportunities and provide you with market intelligence.

An effective media partner is in a position to offer you free placements, prominent positioning, and access to events and other value-added services. Building a good relationship includes making and keeping a substantial financial commitment on which the media company can rely, particularly in today’s environment where all media outlets are facing huge cutbacks in advertising spending.

The law firm that approaches advertising as a strategic discipline by engaging experienced professionals to guide it every step of the way is much more likely to achieve its goals in a cost-effective manner. For

advertising to be successful, it must have a meaningful strategy, break-through visuals and copy, and a well-conceived and negotiated media plan. Adopting an advertising plan without these characteristics means throwing money away. In times like these, no business can afford to waste its financial resources.