

Determined to be different

By Linda Julian

The dream of just about every enlightened professional is to be so different and sought-after that there are few credible alternatives and minimal competition in a distinctive niche - one carved out to fit like a glove.

That dream is reality for a privileged few. It's a far-fetched rainbow-chase for most because they lack the tenacity or commitment (or both) to do what it takes to turn a dream into reality.

Differentiation means having the courage not to follow the pack. It means not being just like all the rest.

A current example: "we are a full service commercial law firm". It's hardly a differentiation strategy. More like a sentence to undifferentiated middle-of-the-pack status for most! (Last time we Googled this, it turned up a half a million hits in Australia alone!).

Undifferentiated offers

Many professionals proffer, as differentiation statements, what are, "sameness" statements.

To attempt to stand out with claims like these is to relegate oneself and one's practice to the "hard to distinguish from all the others" category.

Ill-informed professional service differentiators include claims of:

- long-established
- caring for clients
- [non-specific] better service
- cost-effectiveness
- friendliness and courtesy
- skilled and experienced staff.

There are lots more. Just grab a handful of professional practice profiles and do a "global search and replace" - most firm profiles would readily fit another. Sadly, almost any other.

Determinedly different

If you're determined to be different, think through what you do which is substantially different from most or all the alternatives.

Here's a list to get you started:

- markets or industries you serve
- geographies on which you focus
- categories, characteristics, or scale of clients you serve
- special or unusual services or work processes you offer
- unique characteristics of your personnel or culture
- special needs or problems on which you focus your efforts
- price - structure or quantum - at which you offer your service.

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Tough tests

Put your answers to the test: do they really make you different ?

If you're determined to be different - and to profit from distinctiveness - be tough with yourself in working out what sets you apart and don't settle for the anonymity and pressures of middle-pack.

Don't dilute it

If you're a stand-out professional expert in an area, you only dilute well-founded strong claims by attaching others which are weak.

What does this mean in practice ?

Well, if you're an insurance lawyer with a wealth of expertise in liability and professional indemnity, it will dilute the impact of your sales pitch if you also decide to claim significant expertise, say, in marine insurance, just because a few years back you did a couple of cases in that area.

If you're a corporate and commercial specialist, it will only water down the sales pitch you're making in this, your stand-out area, to also claim that you're also an expert in a half a dozen other areas, only tangentially connected.

For those whose claims to fame are as technology specialists, it does little to help make an effective case by adding a few more areas where they can "get by".

Messages at full concentration

To unsophisticated consumers, a lawyer is an expert in all matters legal, a computer expert is expected to know about any computer system, and a management consultant can expertly advise any business.

Sophisticated clients know there are important differences.

The astute client looks to you for leads and evidence of distinctive niches in which you're expert to assess degree of fit with their wants and needs.

Boundaries on difference

You reinforce your case by being clear about where you're not the stand-out expert. You further strengthen your position by framing those limitations positively.

Whether it's a one-on-one pitch for business, a full proposal, or formal tender, don't dilute your core claims of exceptional credentials and fit by hyperbolising the rest.

About the author

Linda Julian is acknowledged as a leading authority on strategic practice development and how to win business for law firms. Since 1979, she has consulted with lawyers and other professionals throughout Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific, and Asia on a wide range of business acquisition, client retention, and strategic management issues.

Her book *The Passionate Professional: creating value, success, and prosperity* has sold in 13 countries and has received wide acclaim. Linda lectures in strategic management and marketing professional services at post-graduate level. She leads the small and highly specialised Julian Midwinter & Associates consulting practice.