

TV or Twitter — brand image is key

A strong reputation is paramount, so why don't more law firms market themselves, asks Jonathan Ames

Branding — even the junior royals are at it. The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge are reported to have instructed London media and intellectual property law firm Harbottle & Lewis last autumn to create dormant companies to protect their image rights and fend off attacks on their intellectual property.

Still, law firms themselves remain wary of branding, despite the legal profession entering a period of fierce competition from service providers such as the Co-op, BT and the RAC — all far more used to the cut-and-thrust of retail marketing.

This week, however, an elite group of firms has been highlighted for bucking the historic convention of conservatism. Eulogy!, a London-based reputation management and branding consultancy, today publishes the top 20 brands in the legal sector, based on analysis of client and media perceptions.

The top half of that league table is dominated by big-name global business law firms, with “magic circle” player Allen & Overy taking top slot. But there are two surprises. Irwin Mitchell, which has a strong personal legal services bent, and leading private client specialist Withers, feature at fourth and sixth places respectively.

Are law firms waking up to the need to differentiate themselves in an increasingly crowded market? David Flynn, head of professional services at Eulogy!, says: “There are still a lot of mid-tier business law firms that appear to be much of a muchness. A basic issue is that there are too many law firms.”

At Allen & Overy, the senior players claim to have devoted considerable time and investment to branding for several years. “If you ask law firms if they think reputation is important, they will answer yes very quickly,” says David Morley, A&O’s global senior partner. “But ‘brand’ for some of them sounds too much like marketing speak.”

Some might argue that branding is less important for magic circle and other leading firms, because their client base is itself an elite cadre of multinational businesses, all boasting sophisticated in-house general counsel as their buyers of legal services.

However Morley maintains that building brand awareness is especially



The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge are said to be securing their image rights

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crucial for firms with global expansion aspirations. “In London, if someone arrives at Paddington Station on the Heathrow Express and asks for A&O, the cabbie will just know where it is. But that wouldn’t necessarily be true if that person went to Hanoi.”

The key to a meaningful brand, says Morley, is creating an “authentic reflection of the firm” and focusing on essential markets. “Professional services firms shouldn’t go shouting from the rooftops,” he says. “We target market-

leading channels. And it’s all about having a consistent drum beat. Our brand stands for a promise — when people deal with the firm, if the experience is different from the marketing blurb they get, then that trust is broken.”

Arguably, brand awareness campaigns are more subtle at the global “Big Law” end of the profession’s spectrum. Pitching to those on the Clapham omnibus is a different game. Sheffield-based national firm Irwin Mitchell recently launched a series of consumer television advertisements for its personal injury services. “We went to great pains to position our message correctly,” explains the firm’s chief executive, John Pickering.

Indeed, it is clear from the TV campaign that Irwin Mitchell wants to differentiate itself from the “ambulance-chasing” side of the profession. “We aimed to show a professional, responsible face in that area. We want to be seen as a high-quality client-led legal service with recognised expertise.”

The researchers praise Irwin Mitchell for adopting “a very modern communications model encompassing all of the major media channels.”

Withers, on the other hand, has plumped for a more low-key approach, befitting its core client base of high-net-value individuals. The firm’s managing

director, Margaret Robertson, explains that the senior team took a conscious decision about 12 years ago to create an “aspirational brand”, a move that coincided with the practice expanding into foreign jurisdictions.

“You have to have a clear idea of where you want to be, what you want to say, and what you want people to say that you do,” Robertson says. Internal brand awareness at all levels of a firm is equally important, she says. To that end, her firm runs “Withers TV”, a network of internal televisions located next to all lifts in the firm’s offices. “It tells people what we are doing and who our clients are,” Robertson says. “We have to make sure that everyone repeats the same brand message.”

David Flynn, of Eulogy!, believes that in a world of multiple routes to market — press, broadcast, internet and social media — targeting a branding message is crucial. “Firms should absolutely not take a shotgun approach to media platforms,” he says. “They should be clear about who they need to speak to and engage within terms of existing and potential clients. And they need to understand the best communication channels for reaching those people.”

Indeed social media is a case in point. “The issue is not really about how you as a law firm want to engage, but how your clients want to engage. So while you shouldn’t be on everything, you should be on those platforms that conform to your business strategy.”

If that means a firm’s client base is keen on tweeting, then the partners had better work out how to distill their brand message down to 140 characters.

Who are the best brands in legal land? Visit thetimes.co.uk/law

■ Professor Anna Lawson is the UK’s first blind woman law professor but not the first blind law professor (*Law*, January 23). That distinction goes to Professor Sir Rupert Cross, who lost his sight when he was one-year-old and was appointed Vinerian Professor of English Law at Oxford University in 1964 where he taught until 1979.

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Clamp down on copycats

An opportunity to protect UK designers is at risk of being squandered today when the Intellectual Property Bill is considered in committee by the House of Commons. Aiming to give the same level of protection to industrial product designs as currently enjoyed by copyright and trade marks, the Bill’s clause 13 will for the first time, criminalise those who commission or make knock-off products.

Yet, says Simon Clark of BLP, the clause falls far short of what is needed and will only catch a small proportion of those who steal other people’s inventiveness. Under its present wording, “those who copy a design but incorporate one or two minor changes will still get away with it,” Clark says. “What’s needed is a wider test that catches copycat designs which create the same overall impression as the original even though there may be minor differences.”

The current victims of this legal loophole, he says, are innovative British designers in small companies who cannot afford expensive intellectual property protection on a global basis. “Introducing an effective criminal offence will be a deterrent to those who want to rip them off,” Clark says. In a world where England prides itself on the quality of its business law it would be a tragedy if our key intellectual property legislation proved to be “not fit for purpose.”

Safe haven

Any port in a storm — but the London Shipping Law Centre (LSLC) has had the good fortune to be offered a luxurious new operating base by Quadrant Chambers in Fleet Street.

LSLC was founded in 1994 by Dr Aleka Mandaraka-Sheppard of University College London as an entrepôt where all sides of the shipping industry could exchange ideas about legal education.

Quadrant is a broad-based commercial set but its history is anchored in shipping. “Quadrant’s members offer unparalleled strength in depth in all aspects of shipping law,” says head of chambers Luke Parsons, QC. “So we are huge supporters of the