

ESSENCE OF A STRONG LEGAL BRAND

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Essence of a Strong Legal Brand:

Great Expectations, Great Assumption, Great Exception

By Leke Alder

I was called to the Bar in 1986. Like every other young lawyer I had **Great Expectations**. Straight away during NYSC I founded a law partnership with my friends. We printed beautiful letterhead and business cards. We were in practice! We had no business knowledge, had never run any enterprise, knew nothing about entrepreneurship. We just assumed we knew how to run a law practice, assumed knowledge of the law is the same as knowledge of business. Call that the **Great Assumption**. Unfortunately, it's an assumption many lawyers make.

A law firm is a business, plain and simple. Call it law practice, law advisory or whatever. The simple truth is that the most successful lawyers are business men and women. But lawyers generally assume the rules of enterprise will be waived for them. They assume they're exceptions to the rule. Let's call this the **Great Exception**.

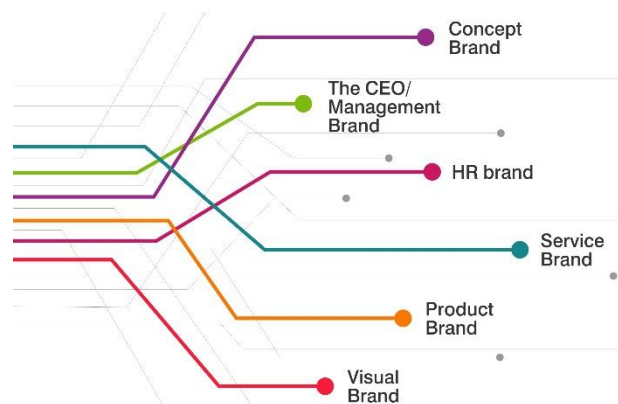
If a law practice is a business at some point you're going to run into the issue of branding, especially if you want to build a modern practice. Things have changed. Branding is an issue lawyers in commercial practice are familiar with. They handle the legal protection of trademarks and logos. If trademarks and logos are categorised under commercial practice it means branding is an economic activity. Branding is not artwork. And so the simple most powerful reason a law firm should brand herself is for commercial benefit – the profit motive. Branding impacts the bottom line, period! Of course we can talk about differentiation but the bottom

line of branding is profitability. The more rarefied you are the more you can charge. This is based on the law of demand and supply. Branding also reduces marketing cost by making people pay habitual obedience to a set of stimuli. It creates loyal patronage. And it helps attract good talent. People want to work in name law firms. It's good on CV.

Unfortunately even though lawyers defend trademarks and logos they tend to be very poor at creating defensible brands for themselves. How many Nigerian law firms have good logos? Lawyers are even more terrible at naming their firms. Law firms have what we technically refer to as "real descriptive names," like "Legal Consultants Partnership."

But let me quickly make a clarification: creating a logo is not the same as creating a brand. Every business has a logo but not every business is a brand. Logo design is visual identity creation, it is not the full gamut of branding. Visual identity is a component of branding. When we're talking strategic branding we're talking about the full gamut of the firm – the essence, vision, mission, values, culture, service and communication. We're also looking at the HR component as well. The reason is simple: non poteris aedificare aliquid ex nihilo. You cannot build something on nothing.

Within a brand complex you have the 6 brandlets:



A major component of branding is communication. Unfortunately, again, that’s not something lawyers are very good at outside of court or outside of legal brief. And it’s not helped by the fact that the rules of professional practice exclude advertisement. The truth is aspects of those rules are outdated but the spirit remains germane. They’ve been unable to catch up with modern trends in business communication. They cater to old media paradigm not new media paradigm or 21st century realities. They cannot accommodate the ambit of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and Web. Is a lawyer self-advertising talking about his law practice on Facebook? Does his profile on Twitter constitute advertisement or is it just a descriptive epithet?

Alder Consulting undertook research of six Nigerian name law firms, mostly in the commercial sector, using a human rights law firm as control. We’ll refer to the firms as Firms A, B, C , D, E, H; H being the human rights law firm.

This is their new media profile:

S/N	Firm	LinkedIn	Twitter	Facebook
1	Firm A	Followers – 1,530 Last post – Aug 9th	Followers – 583 Last post – Aug 9th	2,811 Friends Last post – July 28th
2	Firm B	Followers – 4,137 Last post – Aug 9 th	Followers – 978 Last post – Aug 9th	-
3	Firm C	Followers – 1,444 Last post – Aug 11th	Followers – 298 Last post – Aug 11th	Followers – 497 Last post – Aug 11th
4	Firm D	Followers – 621 Last post – July 21st	Followers – 71 Last Post – July 21st	-
5	Firm E	Followers – 1,504 Last post – June	-	Closed Facebook Group
6	Firm H	-	-	-

You can see poor management of new media communication.

For cross-comparison we examined some of the biggest law firms in the world. We wanted to know what made these practices strong and successful. These are big firms with big financials. Those financials rival major businesses:

S/N	Law Firm	Revenue
1	Latham & Watkins	\$2.823B
2	Baker Mckenzie	\$2.67B
3	Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP	\$2.41B
4	Clifford Chance	\$2.11B
5	Linklaters LLP	\$2.01B

In studying these international firms we came to the conclusion six factors make law firms very strong brands:



S/N	Law Firm	Size/Heft
1	Baker Mckenzie	13,000 Staff 4,700 Lawyers 77 Offices 47 Countries
2	Clifford Chance	3,300 Lawyers 36 Offices 6 Countries
3	Linklaters LLP	4,765 Staff 2,164 Lawyers 29 Offices 20 Countries
4	Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP	3,500 Staff 1,700 Lawyers 22 Offices
5	Latham & Watkins	2,200 Lawyers 30 Offices

We then applied the six parameters to the six Nigerian law firms. We eliminated Earning Capacity since financials are not readily available. It was replaced with a brand factor, “Communication.” This is the ranking produced:

S/N	Firm	Size/Heft	Leadership/ Management	Strategic Focus	Quality of Expertise	Strong Visual Identity	Communication	Score/Brand Positioning
1	A	70 lawyers 3 offices	9	8	9	8	8	43 - 1st
2	B	70 lawyers 3 offices	9	9	9	7	6	40 - 2nd
3	C	70 lawyers 2 offices	9	8	9	6	7	39 - 3rd
4	D	50 Lawyers 5 offices 2 countries	9	7	7	5	6	34 - 5th
5	E	4 offices 2 countries	9	8	8	5	4	34 - 5th
6	H	Over 20 lawyers 3 offices	9	9	8	6	5	37 - 4th

[Disclosure: Alder Consulting has consulted for two of these law firms and is in business dialogue with a third on strategic branding].

Drawing from the foregoing the simple conclusion from these case studies is that a different approach to the management of law firms is required for the 21st century. Branding is going to be a major success factor going forward. It is important for law firms to develop a coherent brand strategy. A strategic communication blue print must be developed also. The business fundamentals must however be strong. Without branding the business potential of many law practices will not be realised. In which case we're back to those three fallacies – Great Expectation, Great Assumption, Great Exception.

Thank you!

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About Leke Alder

Leke Alder was called to the Nigerian Bar in 1986. He is the Founder & Principal of Alder Consulting, Nigeria's premier creative intelligence organisation, with offices in Lagos and London (www.alder-consulting.com). He is credited with introducing branding as a discipline to Nigeria and has consulted on policy, politics and business at the highest levels at home and abroad. He has consulted on policy formulation for the Federal Government of Nigeria, the Federal Ministries of Information & Communication, Education, Foreign Affairs, Solid Minerals Development, and others. He has also consulted on political strategy and communication campaigns at national and sub-national levels locally and internationally.

He served as panelist at the Annual Africa Business Conferences of Harvard Business School, Wharton Business School and Kellogg School of Management. He is the author of several books and a mentor to young people.

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