

Taglines Revisited: How They Support Business Development, How They Don't

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A waggish friend of ours who works for a huge global law firm once mused on the perfect tagline for his employer: "2,000 Lawyers – No Wait!"

Ever since firms discovered "branding" in the 1990s, their efforts to encapsulate those brands with taglines pasted atop their collaterals and websites have met with some skepticism if not derision. Not unfairly in many cases, detractors have pointed out that law firm taglines are often hollow recapitulations of predictable marketing promises. One typically vapid example might be "We Put Our Clients First."

There's a quick way to immediately differentiate such empty rhetoric from potentially more substantive taglines. Ask yourself whether any professional service organization would admit the opposite, for example, "putting our clients second?" If not, the claim in the tagline no more effectively communicates *practicable* value than "All Our Lawyers Went to Law School."

The word "practicable" is important in this context because it suggests a further criterion by which to assess, not only whether a tagline communicates a credible value-based message, but also whether the message itself can actually support business development. Imagine yourself and your partners in the final stage of a new business pitch. It's that last twenty yards before closing new business. Taking a cue from the NFL, I've dubbed it the "Red Zone."

At that crucial point in the game, is the firm's tagline palpably relevant to the discussions with the prospective client? If not, there's a serious disconnect between your firm's marketing and selling. You've labored hard to craft that tagline. At the end of the selling cycle, your tagline must be more than an introduction to your firm; *it must also be a takeaway.*

Connecting the Dots

The more a firm's attorneys interpose the brand into the sales process, the more credible the brand becomes and the stronger its impact. That said, let's take a look at some strong examples of law firm taglines, with an eye to how some of them can, as they must, serve as tools to close new business.

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- Dickstein Shapiro LLP markets "Experience Innovation."
- Wolf Greenfield defines itself as "Specialists in Intellectual Property Law."
- The welcome screen on the Fitzpatrick, Cella, Harper & Scinto website professes "We Are IP" even before the firm's name appears.
- Ius Laboris, an alliance of international law firms that specialize in employment and human resources law, brands itself with the tagline "Global Human Resources Lawyers."

These taglines compel by focusing on the *what*: a specialty, a deliverable, a core function or attribute. They immediately communicate what the firm is all about.

Others choose to emphasize action: how the organization operates, presumably in a way that defines both itself and how it benefits clients. For example:

- Ogletree Deakins's tagline is simply "Now," to convey that the firm will solve the client's immediate problems. If you couldn't sleep last night because of those problems, the firm will ensure that tomorrow night will be more comfortable.
- Faegre & Benson stresses "We Deliver *More Together*," strategically emphasizing the importance of partnering with clients.
- DRI—"The Voice of the Defense Bar"—promises that DRI "Delivers Resources to Build Your Practice." Anyone familiar with this organization knows that this promise is precisely what DRI delivers. The associated DRI Europe has the tagline "Defending Business."

Such taglines are particularly effective as closing tools. At the ultimate Red Zone moment they convey a nuanced urgency: If you hire us, *this* is what will happen next. These action-oriented taglines demonstrate "how" you do what you do.

Compelling Promise

With Ogletree, Faegre, and DRI, the compelling action point is thus already there in the taglines. Based simply on its tagline, the Faegre message during Red Zone discussions could be: "You know our brand is all about delivering 'more together'... so let's think about what we want to accomplish in our first meeting if we're retained. Let's make a list right now of specific concerns you want to discuss at that meeting."

Taglines that are based on verbs and therefore presuppose follow-up actions are by definition takeaways, because they answer the question that's been hovering in the room since Day One: "Why should my company hire you?" Verbs, not nouns, answer that question: "Your company should hire us because we will do x, y, and z."

The best branding is all about deeds, not words; deliverables, not qualifications; readiness, not pedigree.

Likewise, DRI in its tagline "delivers resources..." The only follow-up question is, "How?" – a welcome question, really, as it allows the organization to add authenticating detail to the clear promise made by its action-oriented tagline.

Compare such action-oriented taglines with those based on adjectives, using words such as "reliable," "timely," and "helpful." Such firm attributes may not be enough to win business and satisfy clients. While many clients might even agree with such adjectives – "Oh yes, they're reliable...they meet deadlines...they're helpful"– a recent survey by the BTI Consulting Group found that only 32.1% of in-house counsel surveyed would recommend their primary law firms. We're back to our initial acid test for all taglines: would a firm claim to be "unreliable, chronically tardy, and indifferent?" Of course not, and clients know it.

In product marketing, you can get away with adjectives. *InsideCounsel* magazine, for example, has "Strategic-Intelligent-Essential" for its grabber. A reader need only check out an issue or two (complimentary issues at that) to see if they agree. Law firms and other professional services don't have that luxury. Too much is at risk and clients can hardly be sampling services from different firms when some bet-the-company litigation or transaction is looming.

In the world of professional services, the brand must communicate what happens next, the proposed action must be compelling, and the message must reverberate throughout the closing Red Zone conversations.

Institutionalizing Verbs

Not just in the Red Zone, promised action should be the one memorable takeaway that prospects glean from all meetings, speeches, conversations, or pitches. "I seem to be a verb," said the great Buckminster Fuller, and that sense of self as it translates into business development should permeate every marketing and sales training program undertaken by the firm.

Every item on the training agenda should conclude with the challenge: "So what are you going to do next? How will that action benefit the prospective client and help ink the deal?" The way in which your lawyers respond to those questions defines your brand and suggests credible wording for practicable taglines. Firms that have not formally engaged in a branding campaign or crafted taglines to neatly summarize why clients should hire them can still institutionalize this sense of creative urgency in such a way that it leaps from their every marketing and sales initiative.

In the last analysis, one act of doing leads to the next, and taglines like "Now" communicate just that sense of commitment to never-ending service and responsiveness. As Buckminster Fuller so well understood, verbs have no endings.

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