

BRAND BUILDING GUIDE

for Professional
Services Firms

Second Edition

Brand Building Guide for Professional Services Firms, Second Edition

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About this Guide

What?

An executive guide to building a successful brand for your professional services firm.

Why?

Your brand is arguably your most valuable asset. A strong brand will bring you desirable new clients, great employees and premium rates.

Who is it for?

Professional services executives, marketers and business development professionals.

Who is it from?

This guide was prepared by [Hinge](#), a leader in branding and marketing for professional services firms.

How can Hinge help?

Hinge offers branding and marketing services in the following areas:

- Branding and brand building
- Award-winning creative
- Research and strategy
- Content marketing
- Campaign management

Hinge also offers:

- Search engine optimization
- Website design
- Outsourced blog writing and editing
- Social media strategy and implementation
- Graphic design and layout

Table of Contents

5 Introduction

6 Understanding Your Brand

Chapter 1: What Is Your Brand?

Chapter 2: What Makes a Brand Successful?

11 Developing Your Brand Building Strategy

Chapter 3: The Psychology of Brand Strength

Chapter 4: How the Digital Revolution Changes Brand Building

Chapter 5: Top Brand Building Strategies

18 Implementing Your Brand Building Strategy

Chapter 6: Using the Strategic Marketing Process to Build Your Brand

Chapter 7: Top Branding Tools

Chapter 8: Brand Building Blunders to Avoid

28 Conclusion

29 Additional Resources

30 About Hinge

Introduction

Your firm's brand is arguably its most valuable asset.

Sounds audacious? Not if you consider that your brand comprises both your firm's reputation and visibility in the marketplace.

We are used to hearing that a firm's most important asset is its people. But people come and go. And unless an individual's reputation and industry presence are so strong that they impact the entire firm's marketplace perception, not much changes. Your reputation is what lingers.

Brands can be ruined.

They can also be strengthened. And that is exactly what this guide shows you how to do.

Enjoy, learn and grow stronger.

The Hinge Team



Chapter 1: What Is Your Brand?

For most professional services firms, your brand is arguably your most valuable asset — and perhaps the least well understood. It's not too surprising, given that few professional services firms are run by executives with a marketing background.

As a matter of fact, many professionals have never taken a single marketing class. Further, advancement within their firm has been tied to their ability to close new business based on personal relationships and referrals. Branding is an abstract concept.

Big mistake.

Why Formal Brand Definitions Fail

Consult a marketing textbook and you are likely to find a brand defined as the sum total of a client's emotional attachments and experiences with your firm. You'll probably find the discussion theoretical and not very practical. It seems far removed from the day-to-day realities of bringing in new clients and recruiting staff.

In reality, the opposite is true. Your brand has a direct impact on building your firm.

What a Brand is Not

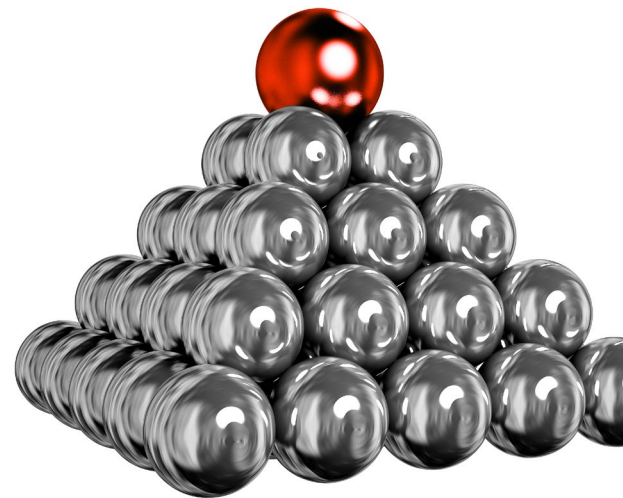
Let's first peel away some very common misconceptions:

- Your brand is not your firm's name.
- Your brand is not your logo or tagline.
- Your brand is not your website or marketing collateral.
- Your brand is not your mission statement.
- Your brand is not your advertising.

These items may help communicate your brand to the world. They may even help clarify it. But they are not your brand.

So what is a professional services brand?

Few professional services firms are run by executives with a marketing background.



Your Brand Defined

Your brand is partly your **reputation**. It's what people say about you when you're not around. It's how they feel about your firm and what they expect from working with you.

Your reputation has two parts. The first is your general reputation. "They are a good firm," is how a referral source may express this sentiment. The second part of your reputation is what expertise your firm is known for. This more specific reputation might be expressed as, "They are the top experts in historic tax credits" or "They are the go-to firm for cross-border acquisitions in the tech industry."

Why does this matter? Our research shows that firms known for their expertise in specific areas get 60% more referrals. That is a major impact. But reputation alone doesn't capture the full scope of a brand.

You must also add in the dimension of **visibility**. How well known is your firm in your target market? The better and more specific your reputation and the greater your visibility, the stronger the brand will be.

A well-known, well-respected firm has an easier time attracting new clients. New recruits want to join that firm. Potential partners want to be associated with it. You can charge higher rates and are likely to be more profitable.

When viewed in this light, it is easy to see the value of a strong brand. This definition also helps you understand how to shape and build your brand.

Rebranding Your Firm

It's important to build the right brand for your firm. Sometimes you need to pause to make sure that your brand is built on a solid foundation. That can involve rebranding.

Rebranding is the process of understanding your current brand and deciding what it should be in the future. You then need to develop the tools to represent and communicate that new brand. A new name, a new logo and tagline, or a new website can help capture and communicate your new brand.

Brand Building

Some activities are consistent with your brand and will help build and reinforce it. Other activities might run counter to your brand (hurt or dilute your desired reputation) and should be avoided.

Similarly, increasing your visibility within your target audience will build your brand (assuming the activity communicates your reputation correctly). However, if that visibility doesn't help communicate your reputation, you will fall short.

That's why advertising is so often a questionable strategy for a professional services firm. Visibility, absent the ability to communicate reputation, is of limited value.

Living Your Brand

To build your brand, you also have to deliver on your brand promise. You have to be who you say you are and deliver what you promise. If you don't, your reputation will soon reflect it.

For example, saying that you have exceptional people will fall flat unless they truly are exceptional. Unfulfilled promises will catch up with you.

Two Brands

When you understand that your brand is the perception of your firm, it's easy to see that different people can have different views of your firm's reputation and visibility. In particular, there can be a stark difference between how the outside world sees your firm and how the people who work there perceive it. You might think of these as your *external brand* and your *internal brand*.

If these two perceptions are out of sync, you can easily make mistakes. You might assume that your target clients understand your firm's reputation, when in fact they do not. Similarly, you might assume that potential clients appreciate a difference in expertise when it is not even on their radar.

On the other hand, if you understand your brand and communicate it clearly, good things happen. You start attracting clients who are looking for a firm just like yours. Ditto for employees and business partners.

If you understand your brand and communicate it clearly, good things happen.

Your Biggest Asset

A strong brand can bring you desirable new clients, great employees and premium rates. It's an asset that has value, even if you move offices, change clients or replace staff. Your brand endures.

It's hard to imagine another asset that is so helpful in achieving growth and profitability. It's certainly worth the time to understand and nurture it.

Now let's take a closer look at exactly what makes a brand successful.

Chapter 2: What Makes a Brand Successful?

What makes a brand successful? It's a good question and one that more professional services marketers ought to ask. To answer it, let's start by defining what a successful brand does for a firm.

Brand Success Defined

A successful brand will deliver the results you expect from a market leader. Here are some of the most important measures of brand success:

- High frequency of referred clients
- High level of self-initiated contacts from potential clients
- A high closing percentage
- Fewer competitive bid situations
- Premium fees

There are, of course, other impacts of a strong brand on a professional services firm. For example, recruiting new employees is easier, publicity comes more readily and third-party recommendations are plentiful.

All of these factors make it more likely that firms with strong brands will succeed and prosper. Let's now turn to what drives that brand success.

What Makes a Brand Successful?

There are five key factors that drive brand success. Some of them are directly linked to the very definition of a professional services brand. Others are driven by very practical considerations.

1. A well-defined target audience

While it's tempting to think of your firm's visibility as universally important, it's not the primary factor. It's far more important to have a clearly defined and well-understood target market.

To be meaningful, a brand must be "for someone." No brand can be everything for everyone and hope to be successful.

Many professional services firms are reluctant to focus on a target audience. They do so at their own disadvantage.

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to be successful.

2. An excellent reputation

Many of firms enjoy very good reputations. That's a great starting place. But to be a really successful brand, the reputation must not only be good, it must also be specific. Your target audiences (e.g., potential clients, referral sources, influencers and prospective new hires) must not only view the firm in a favorable light, but recognize that it has expertise important to their priorities.

3. Relevance to the success of the target audience

Your firm must also be seen as relevant to the success of your client. It's not enough to be nice people, or even knowledgeable and helpful. Those fall into the "nice-to-have" category.

The real driver of a successful brand is your ability to make your clients successful. You aren't just a bystander; you are a contributor to your clients' success.

4. High visibility

Are you widely known to the target audience? Are they aware that you contribute to your clients' success? Are they also aware of your reputation?

Our research shows that this is where many professional services firms fall short. They may have excellent reputations among their clients and be seen as driving success, but their visibility only extends to a portion of their target audience.

This is particularly a problem when you have too many target audiences. It's hard to reach everyone in multiple target audiences at the same time — and with sufficient visibility — to make you successful.

5. A premium position

You can meet all of the criteria we mention above and still fall short of your potential. To be truly successful, a brand must hold a premium position. Without a premium brand perception, your firm will not be in a position to command premium fees.

While you can achieve a lot of success as an average priced firm, there are limits. If people perceive your firm as the most successful at solving client problems and the best place to build a career, you will likely *need* to be seen as charging premium fees.

If you don't charge a premium, people may start asking questions. What's wrong with your firm? If you really are that good, you should command a premium. After all, that's what the most successful brands do.

How successful is your brand? With these five factors in place, the answer should be "very successful."

Now let's turn our attention to developing your strategy for building your brand.



Without a premium brand perception, your firm will not be in a position to command premium fees.

Chapter 3: The Psychology of Brand Strength

If you are interested in increasing the brand strength of your firm, there is someone you need to meet. His name is Edward Thorndike.

You may remember him from Psych 101 as a pioneer in educational psychology. In 1915, he published a paper in which he identified an unusual problem.

The Halo Effect

Thorndike discovered that when people rate someone on one trait it is correlated with their ratings on other traits. Put simply, people tend to see a person's performance as all good or all bad. This phenomenon has come to be called the "Halo Effect."

While Thorndike saw the Halo Effect as a source of measurement bias in his research, the savvy marketer will recognize it as the foundation of the modern concept of brands. When we develop a favorable impression from interacting with one partner at a firm, we tend to view the whole firm in a favorable light. Our impression of that firm's brand is strengthened.

Not surprisingly, it can also work in the other direction. Unfavorable impressions are also generalized via the "Devil Effect."

Brand Strength Defined

The concept of a strong brand is something that we all understand on a very intuitive level. From our own experience we know that firms with high brand strength do better in the marketplace, whether they need new clients, business partners or employees.

So what exactly is brand strength? While there is no universal definition, we describe the brand strength of a professional services firm as the combination of a firm's reputation and its visibility. Firms that have better reputations coupled with higher visibility have stronger brands.

High visibility alone doesn't really strengthen your brand. Does any experienced professional services marketer believe that full-page display ads alone strengthen your brand?

Similarly, having a great reputation that few people know about delivers little more than client loyalty and a handful of referrals. An unknown brand is not a strong brand.



Brand strength is the combination of a firm's reputation and its visibility. Firms that have better reputations and higher visibility have stronger brands.

Increasing Brand Strength

So how do you increase your firm's brand strength? Well, just telling everyone that you have a great reputation won't cut it. It's not believable. Instead, you have to *demonstrate* it.

But demonstrating your reputation across every possible service and every relevant industry is an almost impossible task (not to mention an expensive one). What's a marketer to do?

Here is where Professor Thorndike and his Halo Effect come to your rescue.

Your firm doesn't need to be the best at everything. You just need to be the best at *something*, and the Halo Effect will help pull the rest of your services forward. Similarly, you don't need to be highly visible to everyone. But you do need to have a strong presence *somewhere*. From that starting point your brand strength can grow.

Why Firms Fail

It almost seems too simple. Yet firm after firm fails to use this simple insight — the benefit of *focus* — to build brand strength. Instead they divide their marketing budget across all their offerings and target every possible client with the same intensity. By trying to be everything to everyone they end up being nothing to anyone.

The Halo Effect does not help these firms build stronger brands. Instead, it reinforces an impression that they are nothing special. They allow themselves to become a commodity and are reduced to competing on price alone.

A Better Approach

A better approach is to focus on an industry in which you have a clear strength or a service where you can gain a true advantage. By devoting your resources to becoming the best (or among the best) in that segment, you have a reasonable opportunity to develop a strong reputation and high visibility.

From that island of brand strength, you can more easily expand. Add additional services and move to additional industries where you can leverage your visibility.

And yes, we're fully aware of the political perils of focusing marketing efforts on a limited set of targets. Internal partner politics can foil a great strategy. But the alternative is not very appealing.

In our ongoing studies of high-growth professional services firms, we found that they tend to have a much clearer, narrower focus than their average-growth peers. In short, they have the good Professor Thorndike on their side.

But the art and science of brand building is changing. Blame it on the digital revolution. The next chapter of this guide will help you keep up with it.



Chapter 4: How the Digital Revolution Changes Brand Building

Whether you are prepared for it or not, there is a wave of change ready to break. The world of professional services marketing is about to change in ways that many folks have not anticipated.

There will be new winners and new losers. Some firms will rise to reshape the industry. And it is likely to happen very quickly.

Some people believe that professional services are inherently local. They think you must be face to face to build trust and provide service — ergo, professional services will *always* be local.

As it turns out, there is another path to trust. That path involves building credibility and trust by sharing valuable content and expertise online.

Here are the factors driving that change:

1. Technology is making it possible

With the speed and low cost of digital communications, everyone can communicate easily and inexpensively. The distance barrier is rapidly eroding.

And we're not talking just about voice and written communications. Today, if you want to look someone in the eye, you can Skype them or set up a video conference call.

2. Digital natives are taking over

Anyone entering the workforce within the last 10 years (and that is a lot of folks) has grown up with digital technology. To think technology does not affect the way people search for professional services providers is to deny reality.

And they are not the only ones adopting digital thinking. All ages and demographics are “Googling” their way through their workday, searching for advice, educational resources, recommendations and potential vendors.

Think your buyers are different? That they never search online?

Well, if they are delegating any part of the search it is probably to someone who is less senior and more comfortable online. Someone is checking you out online and you may not even know it. We see it literally every day in the professional services marketplace.

There is another path to trust: building credibility and trust by sharing valuable content and expertise online.

3. The time-pressured executive

Ever notice how everyone seems to be under increasing time pressure? *Do more with less. Do it faster.* It's not surprising then to learn that white-collar workers are the most stressed folks in the entire workforce. They also experience the greatest time pressure. No wonder it's so hard to get an appointment!

Forget the leisurely networking lunch. Give it to me now. Email it over. Google the issue and get an instant answer. Clearly, this trend toward instant gratification favors the digital mode.

4. Free education is expected

Got an issue of importance on the horizon? Go online and research it.

The expectation is that someone is going to explain it to you and educate you for free. Perhaps it's a peer or an expert.

More and more, offering free education is the way professional services firms establish their expertise and attract new clients. And it is working.

In a [recent study of online marketing for professional services firms](#), we found that 77% of firms are generating business online. Importantly, firms that generate 40% or more leads online grow 4X faster than those that do not get clients from the digital world. Now that is a true competitive advantage!

5. Expectation of transparency

People have come to expect a high level of information and transparency from professional services firms. Specifically, they expect to understand and evaluate your firm online.

What is your reputation? What is the buzz about your new service? Who works there? How do you approach a client with the same issues I'm experiencing?

If buyers don't find what they're looking for, it's easy to move on. The next firm is just a click away. Why deal with someone who has something to hide?

When you step back and consider the magnitude of these changes, it is easy to see that the traditional model of professional services marketing has to change.

Competition is going global (or at least national or regional) for more and more professional services. People are getting increasingly comfortable dealing with professional services providers in other locations. Specialists and experts of every sort are making themselves accessible.

How will your firm adapt? What strategies will you employ to stay competitive and build your brand? Let's turn next to what's working best today.

Firms that generate 40% or more leads online grow 4X faster than those that don't.

www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/online_marketing_for_professional_services

Chapter 5: Top Brand Building Strategies

It's hard to overestimate the value of a strong brand for a professional services firm. It can help you win new clients, command premium fees and attract and retain the very best talent. But how do you do it?

What are the best brand building strategies for your firm? The key is remembering what makes a brand strong in the first place. Reputation, relevance and visibility are the building blocks of brand strength. Viewed in that light, an effective brand building strategy will help firms improve their reputation, increase their relevance and boost their visibility to their target client. The best strategy is to do all three.

Top brand building strategies

Here are our top five strategies for effectively increasing the strength of your brand.

1. Content marketing

Content marketing involves providing a steady stream of useful information to potential clients or influencers. Think *educational* rather than *promotional*. It addresses relevance, reputation and visibility.

Over time, potential clients learn how you approach problems and cultivate trust in your firm. When they need assistance, your firm is at the top of their list.

Content marketing relies on winning clients by sharing something of value rather than trying to persuade or “sell” them. As such, it is a great strategy to build a brand as well as generate leads.

2. Develop Visible Experts®

Many firms have experts, but only a few of them go on to become well known and influential with their target client group. We call these fortunate few **Visible Experts®**. By deliberately developing one or more of these high-profile experts, a firm can dramatically increase the power of its brand.

As we described in Chapter 3, the strength of a Visible Expert's personal brand transfers to the entire firm by virtue of a psychological principle called the “Halo Effect. Just as a university becomes more prestigious when it has a Nobel Prize winning faculty member, so too a professional services firm benefits by having a nationally known, high-profile expert on its team.

www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/becoming_a_visible_expert_a_guide_for_professional_services_executives

Reputation, relevance and visibility are the building blocks of brand strength. The best strategy is to do all three.

3. Cultivate prestigious partners

Partnering with prominent organizations to take on important projects is another proven strategy for building your professional services brand. Large, well-known businesses, trade associations or universities are all good partnering candidates.

By partnering, we are not talking about sponsoring events. While sponsorships are frequently thought of as brand building strategies, they can be more costly and less effective than a project partnership.

Instead, consider conducting a research project together or starting a special educational program. An innovative, high-profile project is more distinctive than your logo on a crowded sponsorship banner — and is a far more powerful brand building strategy.

4. Seek high-profile clients and case stories

Many successful professional services firms that have built their reputations upon a single name-brand client or a well-known case study. But this type of success often fades with time. If, however, you systematically seek out high-profile clients and invest in producing dramatic results that can be widely shared, that's a great brand building strategy.

Of course, everyone wants prestigious clients and great results. But surprisingly few firms commit to the planning and investment to turn that desire into reality.

For example, a firm may land a high-profile client, but if their contract prevents them from promoting their work, a brand building opportunity is lost. Or similarly, a firm may focus on staying within scope rather than investing in the engagement to produce exceptional results. If you make high-profile results a deliberate brand building strategy those mistakes are less likely.

5. Dominate the social media space

One of the most highly leveraged brand building strategies available to professional services firms today is to use social media tools such as LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube to engage audiences directly.

To dominate the social media space, however, you have to do more than participate on an occasional basis. Many, many firms and individuals do that. We are talking about investing the resources to have an influential presence.

There's a real strategic opportunity here because adoption of social media by professional services firms is still in its early stages. It is possible even today to become a major online voice within many target client groups. In fact, many small firms and solo professionals have established strong online brands in this way.

While traditional face-to-face networking is still important, consider the time and cost savings associated with a social media brand building strategy. The strongest brands are everywhere your target client looks, and they are respected by everyone they talk to. A strong social media presence is a great strategy to make that happen.



The Best Brand Building Strategy

In most cases, the best overall brand building strategy is one that combines several of these approaches. For example, a content marketing strategy is a natural fit with a strong social media presence. Social media becomes a perfect way to spread the content, and the content makes great fuel for online discussions.

And, of course, these winning strategies complement traditional brand building strategies. Face-to-face networking or trade show marketing work well with any of these strategies.

Build your brand and you will build your business. But remember, no strategy is effective unless it's implemented. That's where we turn our attention next.



Enroll in Hinge University's
Differentiation, Positioning &
Messaging Course

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Chapter 6: Using the Strategic Marketing Process to Build Your Brand

If you're like many professional services executives, the whole concept of a strategic marketing process may seem a bit alien. Even for classically trained marketers, concepts such as the marketing mix or distribution channels seem a bit out of place in a professional services context.

And it's no wonder. The classic strategic marketing process models were developed for advertising-driven consumer products. Professional services are quite different, and they require a different marketing approach.

Strategic marketing process defined

The strategic marketing process is how you align your firm's overall strategy with your day-to-day business development efforts. It allows growth to be driven by a deliberate strategy.

For many firms, growth is a result of luck and individual partner efforts. Marketing is often reactive and short-term oriented. "Hey, we were just asked to sponsor a golf event. Should we do it?" Or "We need some new clients. Let's send out a mailing describing our service offerings." You get the picture.

A practical alternative for professional services firms

We recommend a simple strategic marketing process that consists of 10 basic steps.

1. Consider your overall business strategy

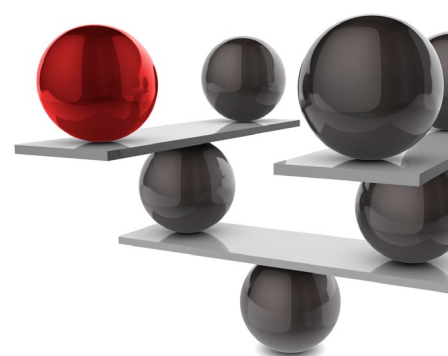
A **strong, well differentiated brand**¹ will make growing your firm much easier. But what type of firm do you want? Are you planning to grow organically? Your overall business strategy is the context for your brand building strategy, so that's the place to start. If you are clear about where you want to take your firm, your brand will help you get there.

2. Identify your target clients

Who are your target clients? If you say "everybody" you are making a very big mistake. Our research clearly shows that **high-growth, high-profit firms**² have clearly defined target clients. The narrower the focus, the faster the growth. The more diverse the target audience, the more diluted a firm's marketing efforts will be. So how do you know if you have chosen the right target client group? That's where the next step comes in.

¹ <https://hingemarketing.com/library/article/differentiation-guide-for-professional-services-firms>

² https://hingemarketing.com/library/article/spiraling_up_create_a_high_growth_high_value_professional_services_firm



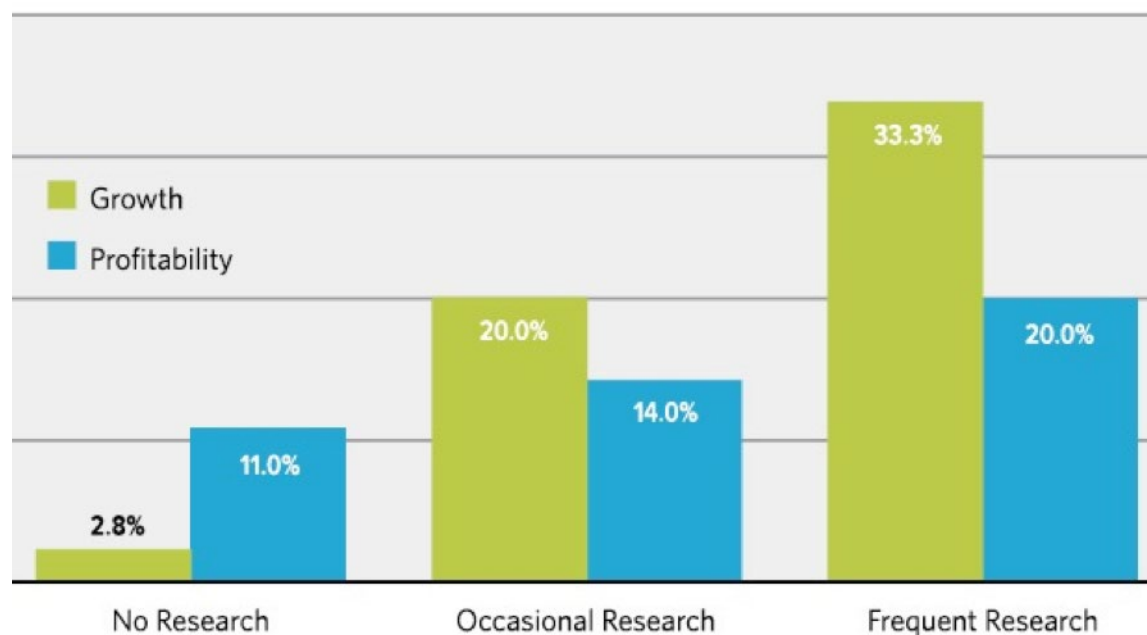
If you are clear about where you want to take your firm, your brand will help you get there.

3. Research your target client group

Firms that do **systematic research on their target client group** grow faster and are more profitable (see figure below). Further, those that do research more frequently (at least once per quarter) grow faster still.

Research helps you understand your target client's perspective and priorities, anticipate their needs and put your message in language that resonates with them. It also tells you how they view your firm's strengths and your current brand. As such, it dramatically lowers the marketing risk associated with brand building and assures that your plan is anchored to marketplace realities.

The Impact of Research on Firm Growth and Profitability



4. Develop your brand positioning

You are now ready to determine your firm's brand positioning within the professional services marketplace (also called market positioning). How is your firm different from others and why should potential clients within your target audience choose to work with you?

A positioning statement is typically three to five sentences in length and captures the essence of your brand positioning. It must be grounded in reality, as you will have to deliver on what you promise. It should also be a bit aspirational so you have something to strive for.

https://hingemarketing.com/library/article/hinges_professional_services_guide_to_research

5. Develop your messaging strategy

Your next step is to produce a strategy that translates your brand positioning into messages to your various target audiences. Your target audiences typically include potential clients, potential employees, referral sources or other influencers and potential partnering opportunities, to name a few of the usual suspects.

While your core brand positioning must be the same for all audiences, each audience will be interested in different aspects of it. The messages to each audience will emphasize the most relevant points. Each audience will also have specific concerns that must be addressed, and each will need different types of evidence to support your messages. Your messaging strategy should address all of these needs. This is an important step in making your brand relevant to your target audiences.

6. Develop your name, logo and tagline

For many firms, a name change is not required. But if you are a new firm, are undergoing a merger or are burdened with a name that no longer suits your positioning, a name change may be in order. Even if you don't change your firm name, a new logo and tagline may help communicate your new brand positioning.

Remember, your name, logo and tagline are not your brand. They are your "brand identity." They are tools to communicate or represent your brand. You must live your brand every day to make it real.

And don't make the mistake of showing the new logo around internally to get a consensus. The name, logo and tagline are not for you. They are for your marketplace and should be judged on how well they communicate your brand, not how much the partners (or their spouses) like them.

7. Develop your marketing strategy

At many professional services firms, marketing strategy should be built around content marketing. Content marketing is particularly well suited to professional services firms in the digital age. It does everything that traditional marketing does, but it does it more efficiently. It uses valuable educational content to attract, nurture and qualify prospects.

Remember that your brand strength is driven by both reputation and visibility. Increasing visibility alone, without strengthening your reputation, is rarely successful. That's why traditional "awareness" advertising or sponsorships so often yield disappointing results. On the other hand, content marketing increases both visibility and reputation at the same time. It is also the perfect way to make your brand relevant to your target audiences.

8. Develop or update your website

Your website is your single *most important brand development tool*. It is the place where all your audiences turn to learn what you do, how you do it and who your clients are. Prospective clients are not likely to choose your firm based on your website alone. But they may well rule you out if your site sends the wrong message.

Further, your website will be home to your valuable content. That content will become the focus of your search engine optimization (SEO) efforts so that your prospects, potential employees and referral sources can find you and learn about your firm. Online content is central to any modern brand building strategy.

Content marketing is particularly well suited to professional services firms in the digital age.

9. Build your marketing toolkit

The next step in the process is to build out the remainder of your marketing toolkit. This might include one-page sales sheets that describe core services offerings or key markets served. In addition, there may be a brief pitch deck that overviews the firm or key offerings and an e-brochure about the firm. These are rarely printed pieces anymore.

Often, this marketing toolkit also includes videos. Popular video topics include firm overviews, case studies or “meet the partner” videos. Key services offerings are also very useful. If prepared appropriately, these tools not only serve a business development function but are important for brand development, too.

10. Implement, track and adjust

This final step in the brand building process may be one of the most important. Obviously, a winning brand building strategy doesn’t do much good if it is never implemented. You might be surprised at how often that happens. A solid strategy is developed and started with all the good intentions the firm can muster. Then reality intervenes. People get busy with client work and brand development tasks get put off... then forgotten.

That’s why tracking is so important. We strongly recommend tracking both the implementation of the plan as well as its results. Did the strategy get implemented as planned? What happened with the objective measures, such as search traffic and web visitors? How many new leads, employee applications and partnering opportunities were generated? Only by tracking the entire process can you make sure you are drawing the right conclusions and making the right decisions.

The beauty of this brand building process is that it keeps your firm focused on strategic growth. That is important because strategic growth adds much more value to a firm than unfocused or undisciplined growth.

Now let’s take a closer look at some of the top brand building tools that you can include in your marketing plan. We have selected these tools and techniques because they build perceived expertise at the same time as increasing visibility.



Is your brand differentiated?

Find your advantage with a free branding consultation.

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Chapter 7: Top Branding Tools

If you are an industry veteran, you probably already know the value of having a strong professional services brand. The question is, how do you build a leading brand?

That's where branding tools come into play.

Branding Tools Defined

Earlier, we defined brand strength as the product of your reputation and your visibility. A branding tool is a technique that helps you build your firm's reputation or increase its visibility. The best branding tools manage to do both at the same time.

Here's our take on the Top 10 hottest branding tools for a professional services firm.

1. Write the definitive book on your signature topic

This requires that you know your stuff. If you are writing a book, you can't fake expertise.

The book should be written for clients, not fellow professional practitioners. If you can make a complicated topic easy to understand and appreciate, you'll position yourself as a surefooted expert — and impress your readers.

2. Produce a signature-quality video

Increasingly, people don't read — they watch. For the cost of a fancy print brochure, you can produce a memorable signature video that tells the story of your firm and positions you as a leading brand.

Don't skimp on the production budget. A ho-hum, talking-head sales piece won't make much of an impression. Do it right or not at all. Here are some [video cost guidelines](#).

3. Develop a must-read industry blog

Make sure your blog is something that potential clients and referral sources *want to read* — it's not enough to have a blog. You also need a clear blog strategy.

Publish frequently (at least twice a month at first, and more frequently if you can swing it), and give your blog some features that stand out. A good blog is like an online magazine, with topics and features that people talk about and share with colleagues and friends.

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<https://hingemarketing.com/blog/story/what-is-the-cost-of-video-production-for-the-web/>

A top-quality blog will build online visibility, as well as attract search engine traffic to your website. Over time, it can position your firm as a leading brand, so don't hesitate to get the help you need to do it well.

4. Publish a provocative industry newsletter

Not sure if a blog is right for you? Focus on a newsletter instead.

More traditional than a blog, a newsletter provides critical industry insight and information that is not easily available elsewhere. Your newsletter's particular slant can convey your perspective on the industry you serve.

This type of industry-focused newsletter is a proven brand-building tool. But to succeed, it must be robust and useful—it has to stand out from the usual firm-centered fluff piece and deliver substantial value.

5. Organize a specialized industry conference

Speaking at and sponsoring conferences are tried-and-true brand building techniques.

But you want to be a leader. Why not be bold and develop your own specialized conference?

Suppose your IT firm delivers cloud-computing security, and you have a lot of customers in the healthcare industry. Instead of participating on a panel at a health care conference, organize an entirely separate event centered on your topic.

Set a clear focus on an emerging issue — one that is not currently being addressed. Keep the conference small and specific at first, bringing in as many partners as you need to make it a success. As the conference grows, so will your brand strength.

6. Conduct a groundbreaking research project

Is there a major unanswered question in the industry you serve? Do people understand their competitors well, or is their perception foggy at best? Industry players rarely conduct research on their own, and when they do, they usually keep it proprietary.

As a service provider to the industry, you have more freedom. Do the research, share the results widely, and you will strengthen your brand.

7. Initiate an awards program

People love to be recognized. What's more, when they receive an award, they love to publicize it.

Put these two tendencies to work for your firm. Create your own awards program to recognize companies in the industry you serve.

Make the awards relevant to the type of work that you do. For example, a UK-based firm named [Valuable Content Ltd](http://www.valuablecontent.co.uk)¹ helps companies create high-value content for their marketing efforts. To boost their visibility and reputation, they created the [Valuable Content Award](http://www.valuablecontent.co.uk/valuable-content-award?valuable-content/)², which they bestow upon a worthy recipient each month.

Consider partnering with an association or trade publication to increase visibility and participation in your program. You will simultaneously strengthen your reputation as a leading brand and increase your visibility among key players.

8. Start an industry index

Develop an index that the industry follows closely and shares broadly. Such an index might measure industry “confidence” or “backlog” or even “sales activity.” By establishing the industry’s standard index, your firm becomes a de-facto leader.

Let’s say that you serve the chain restaurant industry. Start by recruiting a research panel of top restaurant chains. Ask the panel members report average tickets and total diners each month. Standardize the information and report on it widely as the “[insert name of your firm] Dining Out Index.” Eventually, everyone in the industry will receive a monthly reminder that your firm is a leader.

9. Create a high-profile interview series

Let’s say that you market your services to CIOs. You could set up video interviews with the most visible CIOs from the industry you serve. Now, all these high-profile CIOs know your firm. And because other CIOs are interested in what the leading CIOs have to say, they are also exposed to your firm.

Everyone assumes that your firm knows a great deal about CIOs (which it does). In short, your brand benefits from others’ credibility and visibility. The result is a strengthening of your brand.

Share the full videos, excerpts, summaries, etc. in a variety of formats to maximize your overall visibility.

Each of these branding tools can help to reposition your firm, improve its reputation, and increase its visibility. While some of the techniques may be time consuming and require an ongoing investment, the benefits they return are usually substantial. It’s what leading professional services brands do.

But when it comes to implementing a successful brand building strategy there are some pitfalls to avoid. We’ll look at those next.

¹ www.valuablecontent.co.uk

² www.valuablecontent.co.uk/valuable-content-award?valuable-content/



Chapter 8: Brand Building Blunders to Avoid

Whether you are developing a brand new brand (brand launch) or updating and repositioning an existing brand (re-branding), there are several common blunders that can cost you dearly. Falling prey to them can kill your brand building efforts and waste precious time and money.

Here is our list of the most common mistakes made by firms trying to build a strong brand. Many of these mistakes occur early in the brand development process, well before you start brand building. A flawed foundation makes for a weak structure.

Top Brand Building Blunders

1. No differentiators

If there is no difference between what you say about your firm and what competitors say about their firms, you have a weak brand. Unfortunately, this can have a negative impact on your firm's growth and profitability. High-growth firms are 3X more likely to have a strong, easy-to-understand differentiator.

Here is a quick test to see if you have a true differentiator. Think of some way you believe your firm is different. Then ask if a potential competitor could ever say the opposite. If the answer is "no," it is probably not a good differentiator. By the way, having great people and offering great client service don't pass this test.

2. Trying to be everything to everyone

This typically results in being nothing special to anyone. Many firms head in this direction because they believe that offering more services creates more opportunities. In fact, they are making it much more difficult to attract new business. **Having a clear focus or specialization is another attribute of high-growth firms.**



High-growth firms are 3X more likely to have a strong, easy-to-understand differentiator.

https://hingemarketing.com/library/article/spiraling_up_create_a_high_growth_high_value_professional_services_firm

3. Not realizing that your brand is your most important asset

With a strong brand (great reputation for expertise and high visibility in your target audience), a firm can replace people, modify service offerings or even change client segments with the full expectation that they can continue to enjoy success. The firm can be bought and sold on the strength of its brand in the marketplace. A professional services brand can be a tremendously valuable asset and should be treated as such. Failing to understand and invest in your brand is short sighted and costly in the long run.

4. Branding in a blindfold

Let's face it, we all *think* we understand our clients and competitors. But we're usually wrong — dangerously wrong. At Hinge, when we research professional services firms we almost always find that internal staff and leadership have a distorted view of what their clients really think. Firms that conduct systematic research on their target clients can correct that distortion. As result, they grow faster and are more profitable.

5. Making brand development a battleground for other issues

Sadly, many firms turn brand development into a battleground over the future of the firm. For instance, a simple logo decision can become a protracted battle over unresolved issues. Brand development is difficult enough in its own right. Don't burden it with unresolved issues around firm direction or control.

6. Aiming too low

Good brands are both real and aspirational. They stand for something that people can get behind and support. Try to be a leader in something. Otherwise, you offer little reason for a prospect to choose your firm over another. Standing for something helps you build a strong brand.

7. Making a promise you can't keep

The flip side of aiming too low is making a brand promise that you can't keep. Overpromising will cost you credibility and trust. There is a fine line between being aspirational and being unrealistic. People will forgive you for aiming high and falling short of perfection — *if* you are still better than others. But if you aim high and deliver a mediocre product, don't expect much understanding.

8. Forgetting digital branding

The world of professional services is changing. People are learning about your firm in ways they never did before. Don't make the mistake of focusing on traditional approaches to branding while ignoring digital marketing's pivotal role in brand development. **The future of branding is digital, so plan for it in your strategy, brand building and rollout.**



https://hingemarketing.com/blog/story/why_online_branding_matters/

9. The “me-too” mistake

Fitting in with the rest of your competitors is not a sound strategy: *“They use blue, so I’ll use blue, too.” “Every government contractor has a flag and a capitol dome, so I should as well.”* While adopting attributes of your competitors may feel safer, it is actually playing with fire. It’s hard enough to tell most professional services firms apart. Don’t make it more difficult on your prospective clients. If you can’t be completely different, at least try to *look and sound* different. It won’t hurt, and it will probably make your firm easier to recognize and remember.

As you retool your firm for the future, try to avoid these brand building blunders. Your firm’s prospects look better already!

For more information and tips, check out the branding and marketing resources in the Additional Resources section of this guide. Or visit the Hinge library on our website.

www.hingemarketing.com/library

Conclusion

Because your professional services brand is so central to the ongoing success of your firm it should be a point of ongoing focus and investment. In reality, it rarely is. In an odd way, that's the good news.

Because so few competitors are giving brand building the attention it requires, you have a golden opportunity to take the initiative. By giving your brand the resources and management attention it deserves you can garner a meaningful competitive advantage.

Your firm can be the one that attracts the best clients, the most talented team, and the strongest business partners. You can charge the premium fees and enjoy the highest valuation.

All in all, that's not a bad prospect.

We're here to help make that a reality.

- The Hinge Team



Additional Resources

Online Marketing for Professional Services

https://hingemarketing.com/library/article/online_marketing_for_professional_services

Spiraling Up: How to Create a High Growth, High Value Professional Services Firm

https://hingemarketing.com/library/article/spiraling_up_create_a_high_growth_high_value_professional_services_firm

The Hinge Rebranding Guide

https://hingemarketing.com/library/article/the_hinge_rebranding_kit

Content Marketing Guide for Professional Services Firms

<https://hingemarketing.com/library/article/content-marketing-guide-for-professional-services-firms-vps>

Becoming a Visible Expert®: A Guide for Professional Services Executives

https://hingemarketing.com/library/article/becoming_a_visible_expert_a_guide_for_professional_services_executives

The LinkedIn Guide for Professional Services Executives

<https://hingemarketing.com/library/article/the-linkedin-guide-for-professional-services-executives>

Hinge's Professional Services Guide to Research

https://hingemarketing.com/library/article/hinges_professional_services_guide_to_research

What Is the Cost of Video Production for the Web?

<https://hingemarketing.com/blog/story/what-is-the-cost-of-video-production-for-the-web>

About Hinge

Hinge specializes in branding and marketing for professional services firms. We are a leader in helping firms grow faster and maximize value.

Our comprehensive offerings include research and strategy, brand building, award-winning creative, high-performance websites and marketing outsourcing. And at **Hinge University**, your team can learn all the marketing skills and strategies they need to take your firm to a higher level of performance.

In addition, Hinge conducts groundbreaking research on professional service companies. We have identified a group of firms that grow 9X faster and are 50% more profitable yet spend less than average to get new business. We can show you how they do it and implement their strategies in your firm.

To view our full library of research reports, whitepapers, webinars and articles, please visit www.hingemarketing.com/library.

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Help us make this guide even better.

We want to hear from you. If you have any suggestions to improve this resource, please drop us a line: info@hingemarketing.com.

Thank you!



How We Can Help

Visible Firm® Program

Designed to deliver more referrals, higher profits and faster growth, the Visible Firm® Program will build a powerful marketing platform to engage your audiences and build your visibility. Based on the most extensive research into high-growth firms ever conducted, the Visible Firm® Program will ground your marketing in science and leverage your firm's expertise to draw in the right audiences.

Branding Program

Our Branding Program is designed to carry your firm's reputation confidently into the marketplace by giving you a suite of powerful branding tools. Based on extensive research and analysis, our branding strategies increase your firm's credibility and visibility in your industry. The services will also differentiate your firm and provide clear, compelling messages for each of your target audiences.

High-Performance Website Program

The High-Performance Website Program makes your website into a lead-generating machine — bundling a gorgeous new design with a suite of powerful online tools. Designed from the ground up to attract the right visitors from search engines, a high performance site uses educational content, smart offers, and custom features to engage and convert qualified leads.

Visible Expert® Program

Designed to help individuals cultivate an authoritative online presence in their area of expertise, the Visible Expert® Program delivers the tools and strategy required to build personal reputation and visibility in the marketplace. Based on extensive research, the Visible Expert® Program helps experts become recognized industry leaders.

For more information, call 703 391 8870 or email us at info@hingemarketing.com.

To find out how Hinge can help your professional services firm experience faster growth, contact us!

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Choose the option that's right for you.



Want to do it yourself?

Enroll now in Hinge University's Differentiation, Positioning & Messaging Course.

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OR



Need help increasing your visibility?

Is your brand differentiated? Find your advantage with a free branding consultation.

[Request a free consultation](#)