



IS YOUR IMAGE ATTRACTING CLIENTS OR REPELLING THEM?

BY SUE-ELLA PRODONOVICH

It's true that image isn't everything. But when it comes to professional services business development, it does count for something. Because the business world has changed so much so quickly, now is a good time to pause and think about what image you're projecting to make sure it's not out of step with what you actually are and do.

THE IMAGE OF SUCCESS

There's a reason that real estate agents drive BMWs and wear cuff-shredder watches. For many people, it signals that they're successful because they're good at their job. Sure it's superficial, even a little outdated. But when we're making decisions outside our comfort zone we tune in to the patterns and clues that provides immediate evidence.

Social psychologist, Dr Robert Cialdini, calls it pre-suasion or *"the process of arranging for recipients to be receptive to a message before they encounter it."* This involves *"strategically guiding preliminary attention to move prospects into an agreement with the marketing message before they ever experience it."*

Malcolm Gladwell also refers to what he calls ['thin slicing'](#) data – or people's need to take in a small amount of information and then extrapolate about the whole.

HOW THIS RELATES TO PROFESSIONAL SERVICES FIRMS

Whether we like to admit it or not, in the pathway to receiving instructions, professional service firms first engage in some kind of showmanship. The suits tells the clients they'll take the work seriously. (Who wants to see their [lawyer wearing casual clothes?](#) * Warning – strong language)

If you want to compete for the big dollars, projecting the same image - or at least a variant of it - has traditionally been essential. Even those boutique law and advisory firms that have sprung up over the past decade have largely imitated this approach, taking city digs and showing they belong in Corporate land.*

And for good reason too.

Everything is designed as evidence that they're the best of the best. If you have big work that involves serious money and high stakes, they're the right people to take care of it.

GETTING IT WRONG

I've seen instances of professional services firms with very skilled professionals who should have commanded high fees but haven't simply because they've projected the wrong image.

The signals they sent out didn't correspond with the experience a client wanted nor the fees they were looking to charge.

In some cases, this was because their office was tucked away in a bad part of town, surrounded by two-dollar shops and massage parlours. Clients rode in a dodgy elevator and got off at the fifth floor only to be confronted by one of those reception desks behind a security door with no one ever on it. Nothing about the whole scenario said top draw advice.

In other cases, I've seen professionals who want to be positioned as modern and competent but can't find the mute button on zoom. Or worse, they've had a junior sit with them to operate their computer (it may be a misguided attempt at building status but it's a fail).

And in other cases still, I've seen firms whose website looks amateur. They haven't invested in proper content writing or design. Now their website looks like it was built in the 1990s, the most recent article on the site was published in July 2018 and half the links are broken. (Never forget that most people will now get their first impression of you online. With opportunities for face-to-face engagement out of the question for many of us right now, our online presence has become a deal maker)

Each of these may not seem that important but they can bring down the image of the firm and present you as enthusiastic amateurs rather than professionals.

CAN YOU TAKE IT TOO FAR?

Then again, not everyone wants to see their money getting thrown about. If your specialty is suburban conveyancing and you go and take out offices to rival Allens & Linklaters, you're unlikely to attract much work.

There is a place for the humble suburban lawyer or accountant (although that's not in [running complex Constitutional matters](#)). Here, you need to strike a balance. You don't want to look unprofessional but being too extravagant will repel the same people who should be your clients. I've also heard grumbings from corporate clients about their big-firm lawyers and accountants wasting money on fit-outs and office space much better than their own (although I notice, few ever choose to leave them because of that).

Keep in mind the economic role of social competition in buyer behaviour: "If my lawyer is more expensive than your lawyer then I myself are better than you."

What's most important is that your image speaks to your client base and gives them the right impression about who you are and what you do.

In other words, if you pride yourself on affordable advice don't flash the cash. If you pride yourself on doing complex work for large corporates, make sure you have the infrastructure and image to back that up. If you pride yourself on personal, approachable relationships don't make clients fill out a form to contact you.

In short, do what you can to make everything about your firm something that aligns with your clients' values and builds trust. Now, here are four tips for doing just that.

1. Put yourself in your prospective clients' shoes.

What will build trust in the quality of your services *before* they've met you? What's likely to repel them?

2. Sort out your website.

Most potential clients now go online to check out their professionals. What does your site tell them about you?

3. Be realistic.

If you're selling Volkswagens don't pretend you're selling Ferraris. Big firms can get away with some showiness but can you?

4. Be authentic.

Projecting image isn't about tricking people into thinking you're something that you aren't. They'll find out soon enough.

* For firms who work with clients who prefer inconspicuous consumption there are still clues to who you are and what kind of job you'll do. Toning down the showiness of 'things' and spotlighting strong cultural cues such a concern for well-being, diversity and inclusion, [Reconciliation](#), or evidence of cost consciousness and waste wariness, can actually have the same effect.

FURTHER READING

Bagwell, L.S and Bernheim, B D (1996) "Veblen Effects In A Theory of Conspicuous Consumption" The American Economic Review [Vol. 86, No. 3 \(Jun., 1996\)](#), pp. 349-373 (25 pages). Published By: American Economic Association

Cialdini, R (2017) *Pre-Suasion: A Revolutionary Way to Influence and Persuade*. Cornerstone Books

Currid-Halkett, Elizabeth (2017) "[Conspicuous Consumption is Over. It's all about Intangibles Now](#)".

Currid-Halkett, Elizabeth (2017) *The Sum Of Small Things.*" Princeton University Press

[ARTICLE PDF](#)

[Curb Your Enthusiasm – Casual Friday](#) (Warning: strong language)

Gladwell, M. (2007) *Blink: The Power Of Thinking Without Thinking*, Back Bay Books

Ifould, R (2009) [Acting on Impulse](#), The Guardian

Sue-Ella Prodonovich (2021) [Maybe You Can Judge a Book By Its Cover](#)

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Sue-Ella Prodonovich

sueella@prodonovich.com

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