

# Musing From Behind the One-Way Mirror

By Elonide Semmes, *President, Right Hat*

On a regular basis, we have the privilege of sitting behind a one-way mirror at a market research firm to listen to the buyers of legal services. For a monetary incentive we are able to get General Counsel and C-suite executives from *Fortune* 100 firms to share their insights.

A facilitator explores the nuances of how legal services are bought and valued. Then, the groups evaluate various law firm marketing materials. Sometimes these sessions are painful beyond words. It makes for a long evening when a session starts with a GC describing our client as arrogant or stuffy. (They had thought of themselves as thoughtful and serious.) Or worse yet when they don't realize that our client has provided their company services for the past five years. (So much for cross-selling.) But, focus groups and in-depth interviews enable our clients to hear first-hand how hard it is to have ads, brochures, and legal alerts rise above the clutter. And most important, they learn that buyers are hungry to hear and learn something that can help them distinguish among business-to-business law firms.

Although each research study has a different purpose, there are similar issues and complaints that we see cropping up in every session. We've sorted through the feedback of more than 500 buyers of legal services in the past three years. Here are some of the common themes straight from the men and women that your business development plans are targeting.

**Buyers are hungry for plain English and strong journalistic styles.** They often cite *The Wall Street Journal* and *Fortune* magazine as writing styles that are accessible yet deal with complicated or tough topics. Excellent brief writing is

not the same as compelling journalistic writing. Materials that have been aggressively copyedited by a copywriter routinely receive positive feedback.

**They love a good, provocative headline or subheads in a brochure or ad. And wit is appreciated across the board.** As one GC recently said, "Our jobs can be dull or hard enough, so when a law firm is able to use a bit of wit or appropriate humor, we think working with the firm is generally going to be a more pleasant experience." Variations of this sentiment were repeated in every focus group where ads were tested.

**Ads and brochures don't sell work, but they predispose the prospect to feel a certain way about the firm prior to the first meeting.** Participants in 100 percent of the focus groups indicated that marketing materials had an impact in how they felt about law firms where they had no prior relationship.

**They generally abhor brochures that are longer than a tri-panel.** Why? They don't feel these add value and they can—and should—learn enough about the firm in a shorter piece. The buyers are just trying to be efficient with their time. A brochure that is too long makes the buyers perceive the law firm as "self-absorbed." They would rather see a shorter

brochure along with a useful white paper. The frustration with long, boring and undifferentiated brochures was brought up in 86 percent of focus groups.

**Want to produce a longer brochure? The burden is on the firm to create materials that are truly interesting to read.** A firm can do this by illustrating complicated processes or approaches. Or by including sidebars with graphs to highlight legal trends or call-outs of key statistics. Just adding more pages of text or cases doesn't grab anyone—it just puts your prospect to sleep.

**Hoping to create a brochure that the prospect actually keeps? You must give them something that they either want to pass upstream to their board or share with their colleagues.** Let's be honest with ourselves. When was the last time you saw a law firm brochure that was compelling enough to include in a *Fortune* 100 board meeting packet? Only four participants out of the nearly 500 that we encountered could recall on an unaided basis a law firm brochure that they felt was value added. By contrast, many participants raise the McKinsey and Accenture studies as the gold standard of useful materials.

**Recaps of successful deals or suits are only helpful when interesting components are clearly highlighted,** such as—the business challenge, unusual obstacles, or the ultimate (and possibly unexpected) solution. The buyers continually ridicule most brochure content for focusing primarily on the legal aspects and not the business impact.

**Do photographs or illustrations help? Yes, they do.**

But, watch out for being too literal. If you try to include a photo to represent everything you do, you overload the reader with clutter. Instead, focus on a few very strong and unusual images. Buyers appreciate excellent photography and illustration and they can spot cheap stock images a mile away. In 100 percent of the focus groups focused on ad testing, poor quality and uninteresting photography was cited as the primary reason that they did not pause to read advertising.

Never use actors or models to depict your own people or clients. This is seen as “hokey” and “insulting to our intelligence.”

**Be consistent in how you prepare all marketing pieces.** Buyers frequently commend firms that use the same color palette and structure as these visual clues help them recognize whom the material is from and this goes a long way in reinforcing your firm's name. Remember, you get tired of your firm's materials long before the buyers remember them.

**Writing and designing compelling marketing materials requires the joint energy** of the lawyers capable of providing relevant, distilled content and the marketing professionals who understand the nuances of strong communication techniques. And both sides must stay focused on how discerning the buyers of legal services have become. They are, after all, not only lawyers; they are business leaders using marketing tactics every day to grow their own companies. ■

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## About Right Hat

Right Hat specializes in strategic brand consulting and design for professional services firms. We work with firms, large and small, to create marketing programs that are memorable and transforming.