

Words: Tabitha Barda



For 300 years professional services firms have been some of the most profitable businesses in the world without any help from a third party," says Matt Baldwin,

managing director of PR agency Coast Communications and editor of *PSMG*, the Professional Services Marketing Group magazine, "so there's a constant battle to justify the marketing department's existence."

But it's a struggle that has become increasingly important as competition heats up. Procurement departments have begun inviting panels to pitch for work and the need to differentiate one professional services firm from another is in sharp focus.

"The market wants to know why to choose firm A over firm B," says Bernard Savage, managing director of professional services consultancy Size 10½ Boots. "The recession has accelerated this – in the good old days work was flowing in, but the credit crunch has forced those who had previously ignored marketing to become more competitive and really think about their brand."

Translating creativity for numbers people

There is now far more to professional services marketing than brochures and the odd golf day, but "you need to have both the right side and left side of the brain firing at the same time", says Claire Saunders, head of marketing and communications at PricewaterhouseCooper's (PwC) consulting division.

While business performance is clearly top of the agenda, brand personality is now also coming to the fore. Superbrands' "Top 500 Business Brands" ranks companies against the criteria of "quality, reliability and distinction". Most professional services firms will tick the first two boxes, but it takes earnest investment into branding and differentiation to achieve the third.

This distinction, or differentiation, is where professional services marketers can indulge their creativity – although it must be grounded in solid business objectives and backed up with accurate figures – "God help you if you get the numbers wrong," says Saunders.

She cites PwC's "What would you like to change?" (WWYLTC) campaign as an example of a professional services initiative that used FMCG techniques to appeal to a

At your service

Professional services marketing has often been seen as the poor relation in marketing circles. But marketers in accountancies, management consultancies and law firms are learning from the FMCG arena – tweeting, philosophising and donning David Cameron masks to get noticed – while still ensuring they engage both the creative and the analytical sides of their brains

broader audience. Designed to engage the general public – "the clients of our clients" – in a debate on human values, a website was set up to capture feedback on the abstract question: "What would you like to change?"

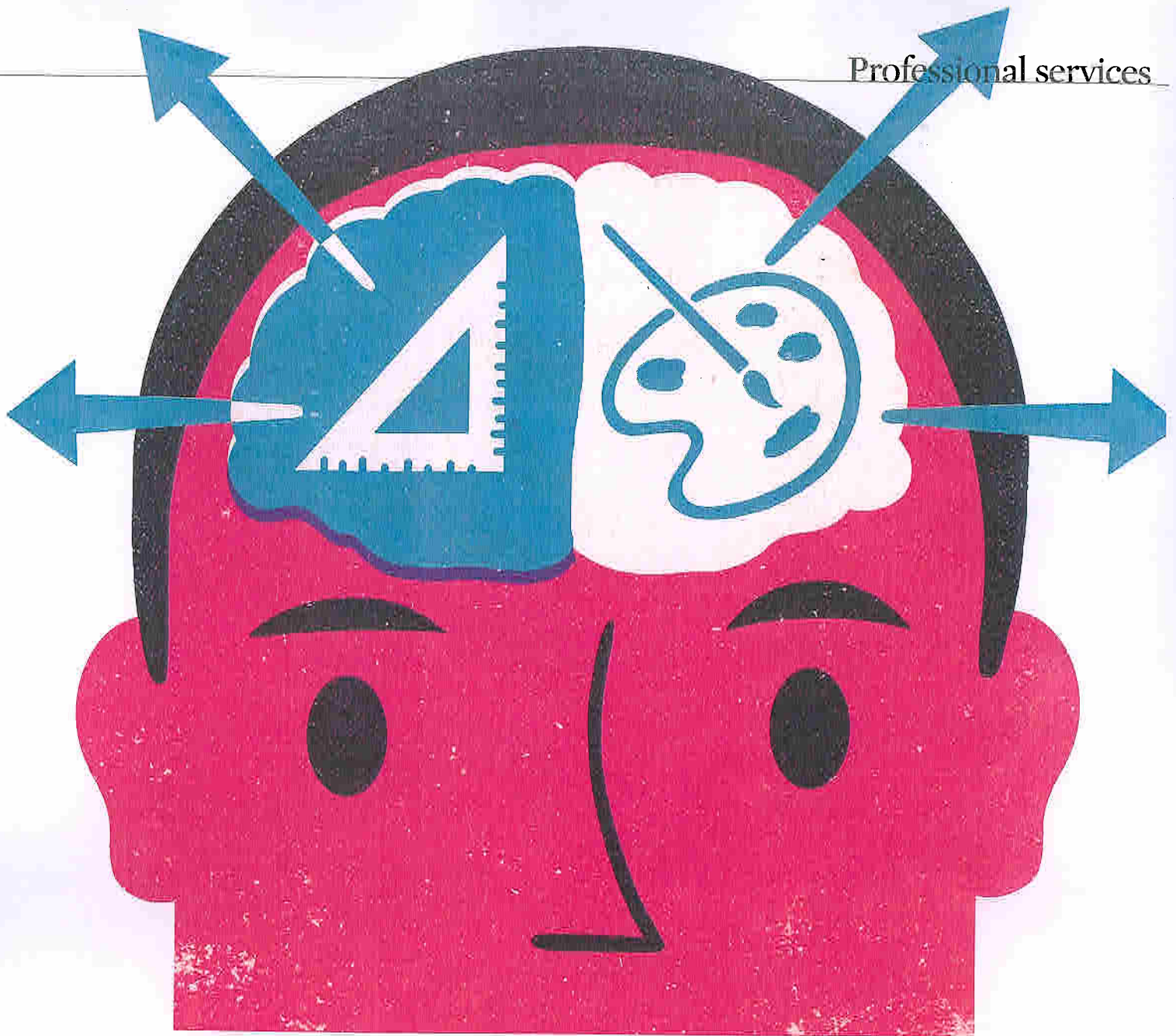
An FMCG agency designed the campaign artwork, aiming for a distinctive move away from the predictably "grey" professional services style. The new campaign used a series of adverts posing provocative philosophical questions such as "Can everyone afford to have morals?" and "Does the thought of a pension bore you to death, or scare the life out of you?"

Saunders says the campaign led to PwC overtaking Deloitte in a *Financial Times* survey, rising from 11 per cent to 59 per cent in "perception of leadership". It generated 350,000 comments from users on the

website, and was nominated for an award by *FT*. PwC then rolled out the campaign in the US, Australia and New Zealand.

As well as engaging a consumer audience, the campaign also impressed the business audience. "At least 15 clients wanted to implement WWYLTC in some way on their own projects or activities," says Saunders.

Law firm Lewis Silkin takes a similarly unconventional approach to its marketing activities. Its "I love ME" campaign was set up to launch the firm's new Media and Entertainment department. Playing with the stereotype of the egotistical "media darling", it used the department's abbreviation, M&E, to create an amusing and eye-catching strapline that would allow it to stand out against other law firms offering the same



services. Embossed on all marketing materials and merchandise, partner Cliff Fluet says the campaign can be directly linked to the acquisition of 20 new clients, representing £100,000 of business.

Lewis Silkin's marketing manager Becky Gillett, an affiliate member of CIM, says the firm is well known for its innovative approach and transfers its quirky sense of humour into all marketing communications. These include direct mail Christmas cards, which in the past have contained Lewis Silkin branded scarves embossed with the strapline "Warm lawyers" and an ice tray with the logo "Just-Ice".

Any gimmicks need a solid foundation, however, and it's certainly possible to go too far, says Fluet. "Our general brand values are

about people, being distinctive and not stuffy, yet at the same time instilled with our views on client excellence and delivery."


While a firm with a Media and Entertainment branch might be able to employ such tactics, Zelinda Bennett, marketing director of the more classically corporate law firm DLA Piper, admits that the FMCG tactics proposed by the firm's media and PR manager, Nicholas Breakspeare – who was hired from an NGO campaigning background "to get them out of their comfort zone" – can raise a few eyebrows. But it pays off in terms of coverage: a report on business issues and the general election entitled *The Business Vote*, written by DLA Piper with YouGovStone, was backed up with a B2C-style PR stunt, distributed outside Canary Wharf tube station

by a marketing team wearing masks of the three political leaders. "The strategy was picked up in more than 40 reports, including by *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *Evening Standard*," says Breakspeare. Inspired by the "thought leadership" approach of the accountancy firms, DLA Piper has released similar reports on topics such as the Equality Bill, European hospitality and carbon. It has also improved its CRM system, client review processes and expanded its online presence, including its use of social media (see "Social media for professionals", p30).

Performance and prejudice

According to Superbrands' ranking of business brands, accounting is leading



 the way in professional services marketing, with the Big Four outperforming the rest of the sector in branding terms. PwC just makes it into the top 10 of Superbrands' "Top 500 Business Brands 2010", while Ernst & Young (21), Deloitte (26) and KPMG (45) are all safely within the top 50.

Meanwhile, the highest performing management consultancy is McKinsey (108), while Accenture lags far behind (208).

"The Big Four have managed to push away from the 100 to 300 mark, sitting among brands such as BP or GlaxoSmithKline that have the benefit of both a B2C and B2B presence," says Stephen Cheliotis, chief executive of The Centre for Brand Analysis.

You could be forgiven for thinking that professional services firms know everything these days: "While all firms do similar reports, white paper and expert opinion activity, the accountancies have

entered a virtuous circle where they have become established as the experts and so more people go to them as the experts. It may well be more perception than reality," explains Cheliotis.

The lawyers are trailing at the back, with Eversheds, the highest performing law firm, only managing position 214. The ban on marketing legal services was only lifted in 1986, which must partly explain the sector's underperformance.

However, the stigma of the "colouring-in department" is still palpable at some firms, while the trend to rename the marketing department the "business development" department is arguably proof of the prejudice becoming further entrenched.

"Partners at many firms still see branding as crass or beneath them," says Cheliotis. "There is the feeling that clients should come to a firm simply because it delivers, but the reality is that branding is as important in B2B as B2C. If you wanted to hire someone for important professional



Social media for professionals Tweeting lawyers on Facebook

DLA Piper launched a new UK Graduate Recruitment microsite and a Facebook "fan" profile in October 2009. "A number of law firms have been wary of using Facebook because they say students have told them they wouldn't like feeling that potential employers were 'invading their personal lives'. Our feedback, however, was different and we've found that as our page is a 'fan' site - meaning we cannot see our fans' profiles - we've had no negative feedback," says media and PR manager Nicholas Breakspear.

"Our number of followers is now more than 530 and this number seems to increase by about 10 per week. Feedback from students was that Facebook was a more popular social networking tool for them than Twitter, which is seen as more business related and mainly for the over 30s."

Twitter does, however, have its place in professional services. DLA Piper joined the other top five UK law firms on the site in March 2009 and has tweeted 463 times, attracted more than 900 followers and has more than 65 lists following the firm and its activities. "We post news of publications, articles and proactive and reactive news comment, says Breakspear.

Twitter can be even more important for promoting regional firms, but while it might capture the attention of a potential client, any sales process will take place offline. Andy Hooper, database and online marketing manager for Kent and West Sussex based firm ASB Law, says that being on Twitter has shown the firm's flexibility to move with modern technology platforms.

"For me, Twitter for law firms is about providing information, showing thought leadership within your content and a little personality to reassure clients of your ability," to provide the relevant level of legal services when required," he says. "I've also noticed there are individual lawyers out there who use it to boost their profile within an industry or specialist area."



advice would you choose PricewaterhouseCoopers or John and Billy's Accountancy Services'?"

Howdy partner

Marketers can have a hard time making themselves heard in professional services. The partnership model of professional services firms, whereby the main shareholders in the business are the same people who work to bring in the money, is a double-edged sword.

DLA Piper's Breakspeare says the structure allows the marketing team to leapfrog the usual corporate management pyramid and go straight to the top.

On the other hand, Cliff Fluet at Lewis Silkin admits that if it weren't for the collaborative culture of his firm the bald distinction between the "fee earners" and "support staff" could lead to a gulf in effective communication.

Paul English, head of marketing and business development at accountancy firm Grant Thornton, argues for an assertive approach from marketers to address the power imbalance.

"You need an ego and you need to be on the front foot," he says. "It's all too easy for professional services marketers to slip into the 'order taking' mentality when dealing with powerful, savvy, client-focused partners."

While it might be tempting to perpetuate the idea that all partners exist in ivory towers, somehow ignorant of marketing and sales techniques, this is clearly not the case. "In a big corporate, if you don't tell the sales force what to say, they might not say anything," says Andrew Shaylor, EMEA marketing director at Ernst & Young.



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"But in a partnership, if you don't tell the partners what you want them to say they will certainly say something anyway, which is why you have to ensure you have communicated what you want," he says.

Frequent communication with all partners and client-facing staff is therefore vital. "The worst thing you can do is produce something at the centre and put it out to the media without informing the internal staff, so that the first time a client asks someone about it, they've never heard of it," warns Shaylor.

Power struggles aside, exactly how to prove ROI in marketing exercises to the partners remains a perpetual challenge for many professional services marketers.

"It's been difficult to come up with metrics to demonstrate value," says Size 10½ Boots' Bernard Savage, who spent several years working for law firm Eversheds after leaving a marketing position at Procter & Gamble.

"How do you control the variables? With consumer marketing it's arguably easier because there's a very good handle on data and market share, which doesn't exist in the same way in this arena," he says.

While there has always been an uneasy relationship between professional services and traditional advertising because of the difficulty of measuring results, ads are more relevant for regional firms than big City firms because of the smaller, more concentrated pool of competition, says Andy Hooper, database and online marketing manager for Kent and West Sussex-based firm ASB Law.

But, as professional services marketing gets ever more sophisticated, more effective methods of measurement are evolving. Shaylor describes his system of tracking revenue generation with Ernst & Young's biggest campaigns. "Any win, any incremental revenue, normally has the partner's name attached to it, and understandably so. But on the big campaigns we have asked them to map out the opportunities they gain on the basis of the campaign material," he explains. "When they're reporting back we then capture that into our systems. This means we are able to say that about 25 per cent of our incremental revenue has been driven in some way by the marketing programmes."

And there are heady heights beckoning: the increasing recognition of the marketing function is reflected in the rising number of marketers who also have a seat on the board, recruited by managing partners after a more significant contribution from the function.

Trust me, I'm a professional

Engendering trust is the name of the game when you are selling the services of a person rather than a physical product. "When a panel of firms is pitching for a client's



business it is taken as a given that they are all competent, so it comes down to personality and whether or not the client thinks they can work together," says Savage.

The risks, and the costs, are obviously much higher than in the FMCG sector. "Buy the wrong washing powder and you can quickly replace it with another for a few pounds. Make the wrong consultancy purchase and a client's reputation is damaged, perhaps irrevocably," says Savage. "A consequence of this is that to get the consultancy sell, it typically requires five to seven touchpoints. The timeline is much longer. Recent successes in my experience have taken several years to materialise and a lot of relationship building activity."

Trust, which can take years to build, takes just seconds to be shattered, as Lewis Silkin's Fluet points out. He cites an ill-judged attempt to gain market cut-through in the form of a national press advert for Barlow Lyde & Gilbert (BLG) litigation services. The ad featured an extensive list of the names of in-house legal counsels and the companies for which they worked, with the strapline "If you'd like your name kept out of the legal pages, take a note of ours".

Fluet, one of the lawyers named in the advertised list, says he and others were "incandescent with rage" about seeing their names used in this way. "We all got this spooky letter on the day of the advert being printed saying 'Check page 15 of *The Times*'. The whole 'irony' was that they were going to keep you out of the papers by putting your name in the papers. It was a complete disaster at every level."

The ASA upheld all complaints against the advert and it now resides in the annals of legal marketing history as an example of what not to do. But Fluet can sympathise: "As chucklesome and irritating as it was for me personally, you can see the situation they were in," he says. "When you're selling litigation services you're sort of selling bad news, and to a client base that is not going to be out looking for a litigation opportunity. They must have thought 'nothing ventured, nothing gained'. There's an element of bravery there, but the results show it's not easy to get it right."

Even well pitched, appropriate marketing material can backfire. Before this year's election, DLA Piper distributed a briefing outlining the potential difficulties a hung parliament might have in passing decisive legislation, which was described as a "well reasoned argument from a respected firm," by



It's exciting; you're talking to big clients and the partners are bringing in billions

Thelawyer.com. Post-election, it hit the news in an unfortunate light when the *Daily Mail* called it an embarrassment for the firm in the wake of the coalition result – considering the fact that Miriam Gonzáles Durántez, who is married to Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg, is one of the firm's partners – although the legal press dismissed such criticism as spurious.

Goodbye grey?

Try as it might, professional services marketing won't ever be the same as B2C marketing. "We do tend to do things in an austere and serious way because, at the end of the day, what we do is very serious," says Fluet.

But why would it want to be any different? "It's a very exciting prospect in many ways," says Coast Communications' Matt Baldwin.

"You're out talking to a selection of very big clients, the partners are often bringing in billions a year. If your budget is 4 per cent of that you have a significant amount to play with."

However, while professional services marketers in City firms may benefit from the buzz of large departments, regional firms frequently consist of one-man bands – a fact which Robert Pinheiro, marketing manager of the Oxford branch of Manches, admits can be "isolating". He has set up the Oxford professional services marketing managers' group, which meets regularly to discuss best practice and to co-ordinate events, while the Professional Services Marketing Group has been around for more than 20 years and now has 2,500 members.

One thing is clear – as FMCG techniques filter into what used to be purely B2B territory, professional services marketing is now much more than cheese and wine evenings. Indeed in some firms the marketing is so sophisticated and well integrated that it is difficult to distinguish it as marketing.

McKinsey, cited by Ernst & Young's Andrew Shaylor as one of the best professional services marketers for its distribution of *The McKinsey Quarterly* and other "thought leadership" material, does not actually have a separate marketing department, according to McKinsey press officer John Cheetham.

With marketing becoming ever more integrated and closely aligned with overall business objectives, is the best marketing invisible? **tm**

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