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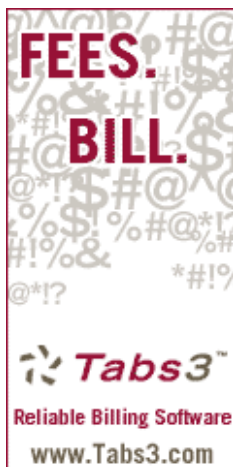
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One Size Does Not Fit All: Cultural DNA Indicators For Marketing Success

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by [Suzanne Lowe](#)

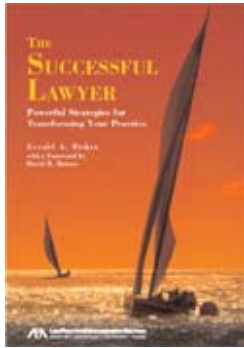
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Much has been made about a law firm's corporate culture when it comes to staff recruitment, retention, and productivity. Indeed, culture is one of the more interesting aspects of a firm's likelihood to succeed along many avenues—but now it has been proven that cultural DNA is a predictor of a firm's effectiveness at attracting and retaining its clients.

As part of a comprehensive five-year study, Expertise Marketing looked at more than 500 professional service firm respondents' use and measurement of a variety of methods to attract and retain clients. Without having a single question on the survey questionnaire about a professional service firm's culture, it became statistically clear that a firm's internal personality or cultural DNA influences its eventual success—or failure—in using certain methods to attract or retain clients. Of the 500 professional services firms studied, their use of client attraction and retention methods fell into one of five clusters:

- *The Prepared Firm Cluster.* The Prepared firm cluster of methods appears quite inwardly focused, with a grouping of such internally-oriented programs as training and communication, career management, or leadership development coaching for a firm's professionals.
- *The Flexible firm cluster.* This Flexible group of methods appears very externally oriented. It combines initiatives such as the implementation of flexible methodologies and customized techniques to deliver services, requiring or encouraging all personnel to switch roles occasionally, and co-developing or piloting new services with clients.
- *The Rule-Bender firm cluster.* The Rule-bender cluster of approaches focuses on taking risks and features a grouping of methods like providing free solutions in order to win an assignment, using at-risk revenue arrangements to sell services, and even using warnings and/or disincentives in order to manage a professional's behavior.
- *The Techno-Hunter firm cluster.* The Techno-hunter group of methods focuses on aggressive salesmanship and relies heavily on technology, such as using new technologies like extranets or pagers to get closer to clients, increased intelligence-gathering about competitor activities, and the use of non-billable salespeople.
- *The Accountability firm cluster.* The Accountability group of methods is oriented to preparation and performance. For instance, It uses incentives to encourage a change in professionals' behavior, adapting performance

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Expertise Marketing then compared these cultural clusters with the respondents' self-rated effectiveness in their get closer to clients' methods. The firms in some of the five cultural groups had succeeded at using certain methods, while others in a different group had failed at the same methods.

It's all about Cultural DNA

Firms that used the methods grouped in the Prepared cluster reported that they were not effective in any of that cluster of methods to become more market driven. Firms in the Flexible group said they were only effective in innovation and service delivery-oriented methods to attract and retain clients. Firms in the Techno-hunter group reported that they were only effective in using new approaches to compete against rivals (which may not be enough to help them become more sensitive to clients!). Only firms in the Rule-bender and Accountability groups reported that they were most effective at managing client relationships.

This finding is not meant to imply that all law firms should abandon marketing practices that fall into the Prepared cluster of methods! On the contrary, those market-driven methods certainly do occupy a reasonable place in the army of management and marketing techniques that law firms have used and will continue to use successfully into the future.

This finding is also not meant to imply that all firms that find themselves effective at techniques found in the Flexible cluster (for example, co-developing or piloting new services with clients), are by necessity flexible firms. This finding simply points out the fact that, for some cultures, certain methods will likely be more effective—especially if used in combination with each other—than they might be if used within a different culture.

Most important, this finding does not mean to imply that every law firm must force itself to fit into the five cultural groups that we discovered. Not at all—these five clusters were the manifestations of patterns from this particular set of 500-plus professional service firm respondents. Depending on the processes studied, there may be many other types of cultural client attraction and retention methods, and they would have fairly unique and distinct aspects to them.

What was most unexpected about these findings was that the responding professional service firms' use of client attraction and retention methods could so naturally fall into previously unnoticed highly differentiated cultural DNA or personality-oriented patterns. Let's take a closer look at this finding. It makes sense, for example, that the Accountability firm would be effective at delivering its services or managing its client relationships. The whole notion of accountability speaks to an almost personal orientation of attending to others' needs, being mindful of the vagaries of a relationship and striving to satisfy—even exceed—clients' expectations. It also makes sense that the Techno-hunter firm would be effective at using new approaches to compete against its rivals. A review of the methods in this cultural cluster easily evokes a picture of competitive alertness, a state of agitated hunger to win business and proactive work to win.

Haven't law firms leaders and marketers already understood how to market this thing called culture? Perhaps not. Even a casual review of a variety of firms' web

sites reveals a mind-numbing recitation of similar phrases: our unwavering commitment to clients, integrity, we value diversity, responsive, professional excellence, our entrepreneurial spirit, commitment to our community and teamwork. You get the idea. But our study's findings about cultural clusters vividly demonstrate that firms actually operate at deeper, more strategically nuanced and more competitively significant levels than what they typically articulate and promote to their publics. This is because we're really talking about a firm's hard-wired cultural DNA—its personality, which runs much deeper than its exterior profile.

Aligning Marketing Strategies with Culture

Another unexpected aspect of the above findings followed. We now have evidence that a firm can enhance its success at implementing market-focused methods—or at least avoid their failure—by aligning them with its cultural predilections.

Does this mean that a law firm simply has to undertake a culture-identification exercise, and then apply marketing strategies and business development methods that appear to fit its culture? Would that firm's marketing strategies and business development methods therefore be successful? Perhaps. But our findings hint at a more fascinating notion: that the best way to succeed competitively is for a firm to examine the strategies and methods at which it succeeds, and then take a step back to see what kind of cultural DNA, or firm personality those methods appear to spell. If more firms did this, and then enacted those successful strategies that fit into a distinct culture or personality pattern, they might be able to avoid the fate of firms in the Prepared group: vainly investing time and money implementing marketing strategies and methods that have not delivered them competitive success.

A final perspective on this issue relates to the intentionality or deliberateness of a firm's choice of marketing strategies to align to its culture. As their competitive environments continue to tighten, law firms must assertively move beyond making fluffy swipes at identifying culture—efforts that, as we've seen, usually end up being articulated in a lovely plaque on their lobby walls, in their annual reports or on their web sites.

One Size Does Not Fit All

In order to compete more effectively, law firms must wake up to the reality that they can not apply one-size-fits-all client attraction and retention methods. Indeed, firm leaders must look to the powerful differentiation that lies within their walls—their cultural DNA, aligned around a set of instinctively preferred, personality-oriented processes. Once they determine that there indeed might be a personality aspect to the way they select, implement and succeed at market-driven processes, they can then become more deliberate in the way they further integrate these processes into their firm's organizational persona, so that their implementation becomes almost second nature.

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