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Image Advantage: Creating a Powerful Firm Identity

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Quick, before you begin to read the following article take a few minutes and describe your firm in no more than 55 words.

In This Issue

As competition for projects grows, more architectural firms are taking their cues from consumer marketing, where branding continues as the catch-word of the moment. Propelled by the search for an easy answer, the results are not always distinctive, memorable identities that are the mark of greatness. Firms are too often content with a gloss—pretty pictures and platitudes—rather than a rigorous evaluation and promotion of their authentic identities. As a result, the profession has seen an epidemic of new looks and logos that lack the kind of differentiation that creates understanding, loyalty, and at best, “aura” in the marketplace.

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Addressing the issue of identity demands far more than innovative graphics, a hot Web site, or a name change. Successful branding initiatives begin with the most basic, and perhaps the most challenging, question, “Who are you?” An honest, thoughtful response requires a focused, sometimes uncomfortable, examination of the true purpose and values of the firm.

Authenticity

Expressing the authentic identity of an organization, through an integrated program that encompasses aspects of firm culture from behavior to graphics, creates far more than a brand—it is the source of true competitive advantage. The good news is that every organization can develop a distinct and powerful image advantage. The bad news: too many firms default to copycat imagery and language.

The lack of differentiation not only confuses clients, it makes them wonder what is real. Lack of authenticity is hardly benign; it is, in fact, fake. Although we are culturally ready to accept the artificial in everything from hair color, lips, and noses to themed environments, no client wants a less-than-forthright relationship with his or her architect. No single firm can be all things to all clients—market needs are widely diverse and, happily, so are the passions and talents of architectural practices.

Where do you begin the search? Right in the studio there are artifacts that, no doubt, reveal the heritage, culture, and beliefs of the firm. Look around. Who are your heroes and muses, what images are posted in the workstations, what sources are referenced again and again? What do they say about the values of the individuals who make up your organization? Unspoken evidence speaks loudly.

Next, spend time with your people. Who works there, what matters most to them, why did they choose the firm, and why do they stay? And what about your best collaborators? Or your best clients? Extended teams are like tribes—they have shared values, they understand and respect one another, and they enjoy working together. Who is part of your tribe and why?

Human beings are hardwired for narrative. What are the stories that are told and retold around the coffee bar or in every presentation? How does the team talk about projects and people, about their achievements or failures? Listen closely. This is the real language of your firm. In some places it sounds like a graduate design studio or a critical journal, in others the talk is of clients and how to make

them happy. Listen not just for the plot but also for the language itself, the nouns and verbs. You might be surprised at how original and descriptive your own language is.

Think back to the defining moments in the life of your organization. It might be how you started the business, made a strategic hire, or a managed a significant win or loss. How and why did you and your partners react when there was a critical decision to be made? What was at stake? What informed your actions? How did those challenges and choices define your identity today?

Self-Fashioning

Now pull out that 55-word description, along with a copy of your latest proposal and your mission statement. Do these documents capture the unique culture of your organization as you have been observing it? Or, if your name is not on the letterhead, could they belong to any of your competitors? If you are in doubt, visit a dozen different architectural Web sites or the architecture section of your favorite bookstore for some comparative analysis—include the usual suspects for your market but also some of the recognized leaders in specific areas.

Market leadership is linked to an ability to articulate distinctive values, be they aesthetics, technological superiority, or cultural concerns. Leaders know their strengths and play to them in their work, in their materials, and in dozens of revealing details. What about you? You have the power to project an authentic identity at multiple levels in strategic statements about your mission, vision, and philosophy, through the culture of the organization and the behaviors of your team and, of course, in the verbal and visual expressions that we think of as brand images.

If an internal audit reveals a gap between your true identity, the deeply held beliefs and aspirations of the firm, and the branded deliverables and actions that form your image in the marketplace, it is time to self-fashion. Developing a distinct image that resonates with the values and vision of your organization is also a step towards sustainability. A clear and memorable identity attracts like minds, as colleagues and as clients, and will allow your firm to evolve as markets change.

When he was selected as one of Time magazine's most influential people of 2004, Frank Gehry called for authenticity —"The message I hope to have sent is just the example of being yourself. I tell this to my students; it's not about copying me or my logic systems. It's about allowing yourself to be yourself."

Components of Identity

Strategic Identity

- Vision
- Mission
- Philosophy
- Position

Behavioral Identity

- Culture
- Values
- Beliefs

Verbal/Visual Identity

- Name(s)
- Lexicon
- Symbol/Logotype
- Visual Systems
- Standards

Definitions

Identity—The expression of the aspirations, values, and purpose of the firm. The discovery, fashioning, affirmation, and nurturance of an authentic firm identity are critical to a satisfying, successful, and sustainable practice.

Image—The coherent and consistent representation of identity such that it reveals the true and differentiating qualities of the firm. The development of a compelling narrative about the vision, history, and culture of the organization is a powerful communication tool for both internal and external audiences.

Position—The place that the firm holds in the perception of its audiences. Positioning defines the organization in terms of value creation. If the firm does not determine and control the positioning message, the marketplace will do so.

Branding—The systematic and consistent use of the firm identity (the brand) in all communications with the audience. The branding structure is used to optimize and illustrate how the verbal and visual elements relate to one another to maximize both audience and stakeholder perceptions of value.

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