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Virtually everyone agrees that being able to differentiate your firm is cool. Yet, very few local CPA firms are in fact, different. To be fair, the nature of what CPAs do naturally makes them look more alike than different.

But when I think about the 1,000+ firms I have consulted with over 20 years, many of the more successful firms truly differentiated themselves from others, even though

they were *not* really that much different from other firms in the eyes of the outside

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These are proudly labeled as differentiators in CPA firms' websites, but they really are not.

So, is differentiation really worth the effort?

Absolutely, primarily for underperforming firms and for all firms that want to get better, every year.

Gale Crosley, CPA, a preeminent CPA firm consultant specializing in revenue growth, says:

“Differentiating your firm is a powerful way to impress clients with your knowledge of their business and industry compared to other firms. Without truly differentiating your firm, you will end up competing on price every time. Differentiation is the path to growth.”

Lee Frederiksen, PhD, is the Managing Partner of Hinge, a consulting firm that focuses on the branding and marketing of professional service firms. Says Frederiksen:

“Too many firms misidentify what makes them unique and miss opportunities to stand out or reject the necessity of differentiation.”

My review of CPA firm web sites revealed these true differentiators:

- A specialty service or industry focus such as technology consulting or construction
- Value pricing.
- A specific geographic focus.
- University-style training of staff.
- Audit quality held to a higher standard because of PCAOB experience.

- Part of an international alliance used to access national and global resources.

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when you make business development presentations to prospects, you should explain how the differentiators at the heart of your business will help that client succeed. You have to live and breathe the differentiator every single day.”

If you've struggled with differentiation, keep reading

An outstanding article by **Gale Crosley** published in the November, 2015 edition of *Accounting Today*, expounded on differentiation. The following are quotes from that article.

“Too many firms find themselves with commoditized offerings that are hard to distinguish and lack apparent value. The path to value requires that you establish a profound understanding of the target specialty. You do this by committing to, and immersing yourself in the ecosystem of the specialty.

“Being able to uncover, build and communicate this type of value is where revenue is won. More often than not, the buyer is not going to perceive infinitesimal differences between your firm and others. But they *will* remember that you understand them and this is where value is built.

“With so much at stake, there's no excuse for an unremarkable firm whose pricing, offerings and website are indistinguishable from the competition.”

[CPA Firm Succession Planning: A Perfect Storm](#) is a must-read for firms that want to stay independent rather than merge out of existence due to a lack of successors. Many firms believe that succession planning starts and stops with developing future leaders, but there are many other important parts to a succession plan. This book addresses ►how to assess your existing staff, ►leadership development, ►MP

transition, ►governance structure needed to remain independent, ►client

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