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FIRM MANAGEMENT

Growing Your Firm: The Value of Building a Connected Brand

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A decade ago, having a strong brand was all about unity. As long as your firm’s visual identity and communications were cohesive, your brand was considered effective. Fast forward to today’s digital economy and a unified brand presence is simply not enough—brands need to be connected. A firm with a connected brand not only serves clients—but also engages and builds loyal relationships with them, differentiating itself in the process.

Developing a “connected” brand for your firm is more than a passing fad. It is a strategy that addresses the changes that our economy has undergone over the past several years—and, in a few short years it will separate the firms that grow and succeed from those that don’t. **Consider the following statistics about how the**

explosive growth of online and mobile platforms is influencing how people access and use information:

1. Nielsen market research shows that 95% of mobile users use their devices for local search.
2. According to marketing guru Jay Baer, B2B decision makers only contact a company's sales representative *after* 60% of their purchase decision has been made using online sources such as the company's website (and those of its competitors).

The take away here is that the quality of your web presence is likely to be the first impression that a prospective client has of your firm, which, in turn, is likely to be formed as they look at your site on their smart phone or tablet. It's an environment where your existing clients are looking to find the same level of convenience and utility from your firm as they get from the "big" brands like Starbucks and Fidelity—i.e. they would prefer to receive your services 24/7 online on your website or even better, through a mobile app.

So how does an accounting firm create a connected brand strategy? From my perspective, there are three building blocks to consider: an effective website, a mobile-optimized website, and a mobile application. Although they must be part of an integrated brand unit, let's look at them discretely to avoid confusion about how they can benefit your firm:

An Effective Website—There is a difference between having a website and having an *effective* website. An effective website is truly an extension of your firm's overall brand *and* a place to do business. Your firm's website should create a valuable experience for your clients with dynamic, useful content and convenient access to the services your firm offers, rather than being just an online brochure. It needs to offer the functionality your clients need such as being able to log in directly to QuickBooks, QuickBooks Online, Bill.com, and their client portal, for example.

A Mobile-Optimized Website—Once you have an effective website, the next step is to make sure that it provides a quality experience not only to those accessing it using a desktop or laptop computer, but to the millions of smart phone and tablet users as well. A mobile website is similar to a traditional website, the key difference is that it is designed to display and function on smaller, touch-screen mobile devices. In addition to standard web content, a mobile-optimized site can offer features such as click-to-call (to dial a phone number) and location-based mapping.

A Mobile Application—It seems like there is an app for everything. The question is— should there be one for your firm? Before you answer, consider the benefits of an app. Apps, like mobile websites, are accessed on mobile devices, but they are essentially mini programs that are downloaded and installed on a phone or tablet, rather than being accessed online. Once you have a mobile website, consider creating a customized app that offers your clients some additional convenience or value-added tools, such as being able to access their financial information without having to log in to their client portal, the ability to make an appointment with your firm, or the ability for your firm to send push notifications to clients when work is completed. Of course, you should also take into consideration the cost of developing an app and ensure that it will fulfill the needs of your client base before you invest in developing one.

While the three building blocks of websites, mobile-optimized websites, and mobile apps are essential to your firm's ability to leverage the new era of brand connectivity to your firm's advantage, having a connected brand involves more than implementing these tools. Improving the connectivity of your firm's brand is really a process of extending the philosophy, expertise, and client services that you already have and ensuring that your firm is effectively represented and accessible to your existing and prospective clients, not only at your physical firm, but across all of the touchpoints where they want to connect with you.

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