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By Scott Cytron, ABC

Just reading the few words that make up this story's headline, branding purists have already made up their minds that I don't know what I'm talking about. After all, doesn't branding take months to accomplish through a bevy of paid consultants who want you to spend a lot of money on concept, testing and implementation?

The answer is *yes ...* and *no*. I've been in many branding situations for companies and organizations that went on for quite a long time ... and with very effective results. However, no accountant I know wants to spend this kind of time on *anything* related to marketing. Nowadays, almost-instantaneous results are expected; they are not the reality, but ROI of some sort is expected almost right away.

Branding *can* be done inexpensively and at warp speed, Mr. Sulu, and that's why the experts are not going to be happy with what I have to say to accounting firms who want to "brand." Pay careful attention; this is one of those behind-the-curtain secrets the consultants *won't* talk about.

"Branding" is in the eye of the beholder and is actually very different for each and every firm or company that attempts to do it. While there are no cookie-cutter solutions in branding, there are lots of ways to brand — some very effective and some not so much.

When a firm brands itself effectively, its clients, prospects and friends of the firm know from just the mere mention of the name what they are going to get. It's that sort of feeling we get when we hear the word *Nike*; we know we're going to get quality athletic shoes and clothing and have the same kind of bravo experience wearing it that Michael Jordan had when he crushed the competition.

When you think about your firm or someone else's firm, what images come to mind?

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cliché as that sounds, it's true. Yet, branding does not have to take a lot of time and does not have to cost a lot of money. It can be done simply and cost effectively. Here are three tips for creating an effective brand.

1. Create a Consistent Message in 140 Characters or Less

Most branding exercises include a messaging component, but I think simpler is much better. The trick is to create a consistent 30-second message that everyone in the firm — from receptionist to managing partner — knows and can recite at any time without coming across as rehearsed or canned.

Also known as your elevator speech, you'll want to create messaging that is honest and believable. If you were to say, "I can double your bottom line," you instantly come off as phony and crass. Instead, when someone asks what you or your firm does, you need to respond with a short message about what you offer and what is different about your services. In other words, you need to persuade the person to understand and see the value of what your firm offers to potential businesses and referrals.

Creating a consistent message brands your firm because no matter where you are or what the circumstances may be, a consistent message solidifies your firm's image in your stakeholders' minds. They will get used to hearing the same words. The 30-second speech is also great for any kind of networking function, or even as a short bio if you are being introduced before a group.

I recently spoke before a group of accountants in Louisiana, and one of the exercises was to have them each write their elevator or 30-second speech in 140 characters. That's right, in only 140 characters; that's the maximum length of a tweet or Twitter message. I explained that if you are unable to tell someone else what your firm is about in 140 characters, then you need to edit your words.

Sure, this was gimmicky, but the results were interesting; some totally got into it,

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2. Decide *What You're Branding*

I've never met a firm that does absolutely everything well. Although many firms don't want to hear this, there's no way a firm can deliver services, maintain a quality staff and experience annual growth increases without something, somewhere along the way, suffering from a lack of resources and attention. That's just human nature; otherwise, there would be one "super firm" that would have everyone's business.

Instead, firms should decide what they do well, stick to their core competencies and brand themselves to these services. So how do you do that?

- List five areas where you stand apart from your competition or similar providers. This could be something in industry niche (verticals), service offerings (anything beyond traditional tax and accounting), expertise (advanced knowledge or credentials), or something else.
- Out of the five areas, which three do you do really, really well?
- Concentrate on those three areas, and build your branding around them.

Consider the firm that excels in international tax, employee benefit plan audits and consulting in an industry niche, such as healthcare. To brand a firm in these three areas, what you'll want to come up with is a plan on how you're going to market and promote your services to those respective audiences.

Each of these requires a different plan on how you're going to make an impact. But just think about how much further you'll be in the branding process if you focus on just a handful of things you do well.

3. Branding Starts at the Top

Marketing directors admit they are frustrated when they spend time branding a firm

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Yes, it's easier said than done, but absolutely critical to the process. The best advice is to get everyone in one room and discuss branding as a group, asking for direction and feedback, all with the intent to build consensus and buy-in during the process.

What are some of your firm's branding stories, good or bad? Send me an e-mail, and I'll post them (anonymously, if desired) in a future MarketingWorks column or on www.CPATechViews.com.

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