

# BRAND BUILDING



FOR

# PROFESSIONAL SERVICE FIRMS

**Brand Building Guide for Professional Services Firms**  
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# about this GUIDE

## What?

An executive guide to building a successful brand for your professional services firm.

## Why?

Your brand is arguably your most valuable asset. A strong brand will bring you desirable new clients, great employees and premium rates.

## Who is it for?

Professional services executives, marketers, and business development professionals.

## Who is it from?

This guide was prepared by Hinge, a leader in branding and marketing for professional services firms.

## How can Hinge help?

Hinge offers branding and marketing services in the following areas:

### Branding and Brand Building

- Award-winning creative
- Research and strategy
- Content marketing
- Campaign management

### Hinge also offers:

- Search engine optimization
- Website redesign
- Outsourced blog writing and editing
- Social media strategy and implementation
- Graphic design and layout

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# INTRODUCTION

## **Your firm's brand is arguably its most valuable asset.**

Sounds audacious? Not if you consider that your brand is both your firm's reputation and its visibility in the marketplace.

We are used to hearing that a firm's most important asset is its people. But people come and go. And unless an individual's reputation and industry presence is so strong that they impact the entire firm's marketplace perception, not much changes. Your reputation is what lingers.

Brands can be ruined. Consider Arthur Anderson.

They can also be strengthened. That is exactly what this guide shows you how to do.

Enjoy, learn and grow stronger.

The Hinge Team

UNDERSTANDING



**BRAND**

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## Chapter 1

What Is Your Brand?



## Chapter 2

What Makes a Brand Successful?

# what is **your** brand?

## CHAPTER

# 1

For most professional services firms, your brand is arguably your most valuable asset — and perhaps the least well understood. That's not too surprising, given that few professional services firms are run by executives with a marketing background.

As a matter of fact, many professionals have never had a single marketing class in their entire formal education. Further, their advancement within the firm has been tied to their ability to close new business based on personal relationships and referrals. Branding considerations are not on the top of their minds.

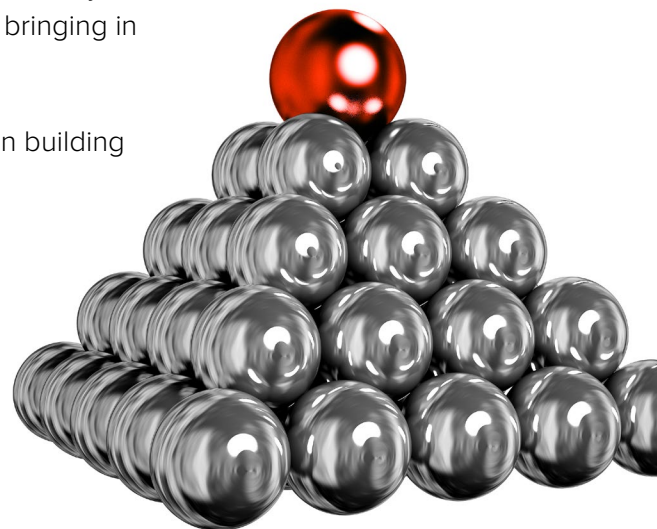
Big mistake.

### **Why Formal Brand Definitions Fail**

Consult a marketing textbook and you are likely to find a brand defined as the sum total of a client's emotional attachments and experiences with your firm. You'll probably find the discussion abstract and not very practical. It seems far removed from the day-to-day realities of bringing in new clients and recruiting staff.

In reality, the opposite is true. Your brand has a direct impact on building your firm.

Your brand has a direct  
impact on building your  
firm.



## What a Brand is Not

Let's first peel away some very common misconceptions:

- Your brand is not your firm's name.
- Your brand is not your logo or tagline.
- Your brand is not your website or marketing collateral.
- Your brand is not your mission statement.
- Your brand is not your advertising.

These items may help communicate your brand to the world. They may even help clarify it. But they are not your brand.

So what is a professional services brand?

## Your Brand Defined

After many years working with professional services firms, we've come to the conclusion that the best definition is the simplest.

Your brand is partly your reputation. It's what people say about you when you're not around. It's how they feel about your firm and what they expect from working with you. But reputation alone doesn't capture the full scope of a brand.

You must also add in the dimension of visibility. How well known is your firm in your target market? The better the reputation and the greater the visibility, the stronger the brand will be.

A well-known, well-respected firm has an easier time attracting new clients. New recruits want to join that firm. Potential partners want to be associated with it. You can charge higher rates and are likely to be more profitable.

When viewed in this light, it is easy to see the value of a strong brand. This definition also helps you understand how to shape and build your brand.

The better the reputation  
and the greater the  
visibility, the stronger the  
brand will be.



## Rebranding Your Firm

It's important to build the right brand for your firm. Sometimes you need to pause to make sure that your brand still stands on a solid foundation. That can involve rebranding.

Rebranding is the process of understanding your current brand and deciding what it should be in the future. You then need to develop the tools to represent and communicate that new brand. A new name, a new logo and tagline, or a new website can help capture and communicate your new brand.

## Brand Building

Some activities are consistent with your brand and will help build and reinforce it. Other activities might run counter to your brand (hurt your desired reputation) and should be avoided.

Similarly, increasing your visibility within your target audience will build your brand (assuming the activity communicates your reputation correctly). However, if that visibility doesn't help communicate your reputation you will fall short.

That's why advertising is so often a questionable strategy for a professional services firm. Visibility, absent the ability to communicate reputation, is of limited value.

You have to be who you say you are and deliver what you promise. If you don't, your reputation will soon reflect it.

## Living Your Brand

To build your brand, you also have to deliver on your brand promise. You have to be who you say you are and live up to the expectations created by your brand. If you don't, your reputation will soon reflect it.

For example, saying that you have exceptional people will fall flat unless they truly are exceptional. Unfulfilled promises will catch up with you.

## Two Brands

When you understand that your brand is the way people perceive your firm, it's easy to see that different people can have different views of your firm's reputation and visibility.

Of particular note is the difference between how the outside world sees your firm and how the folks that work there perceive it. You might think of these as your external brand and your internal brand.

If these two perceptions are out of sync, you can easily make mistakes. You might assume that your target clients understand your firm's reputation, when in fact they do not. Similarly, you may assume that potential clients appreciate a difference in expertise when it is not even on their radar.

On the other hand, if you understand your brand and communicate it clearly, good things happen. You start attracting clients who are looking for a firm just like yours. Ditto for employees and business partners.

### Your Biggest Asset

A strong brand can bring you desirable new clients, great employees and premium rates. It's an asset that has value, even if you move offices, change clients or replace staff. Your brand endures.

It's hard to imagine another asset that contributes so much to growth and profitability. It's certainly worth the time to understand and nurture it.

Now let's take a closer look at exactly what makes a brand successful.



### Want to do it yourself?

From step-by-step How-Tos to in-depth courses, Hinge University will give you the skills and know-how to elevate your brand.

Check out Hinge University: [HingeUniversity.com](https://HingeUniversity.com)



# what makes a **brand** successful?

## CHAPTER

# 2

What makes a brand successful? It's a good question and one that more professional services marketers ought to ask. To answer it let's start by defining what a successful brand does for a firm.

### **Brand Success Defined**

A successful brand will deliver the results you expect from a market leader. Here are some of the most important measures of brand success:

- High frequency of referred clients
- High level of self-initiated contacts from potential clients
- A high closing percentage
- Few competitive bid situations
- Premium fees

There are, of course, other ways a strong brand impacts a professional services firm. For example, recruiting new employees is easier, publicity comes readily and third-party recommendations are plentiful.

All of these factors make it more likely that firms with strong brands will succeed and prosper. Let's now turn to what drives that brand success.

### **What Makes a Brand Successful?**

There are five key factors that drive brand success. Some of them are directly linked to the very definition of a professional services brand. Others are driven by very practical considerations.



### 1. A well-defined target audience

While it's tempting to think of your firm's visibility as universally important, it's not the primary factor. It's far more important to have a clearly defined and well-understood target market.

To be meaningful, a brand must be “for someone.” No brand can try to be everything for everyone and hope to be successful.

Many professional services firms are reluctant to specify a target audience. They do so at their own disadvantage.

### 2. An excellent reputation

A lot of firms have very good reputations. That's a great starting place. But to be a really successful brand, the reputation must not be simply good, it must be great. Everyone must view the firm in a favorable light.

### 3. Relevance to the success of the target audience

Your firm must also be seen as being relevant to the success of your client. It's not enough to be nice people or even knowledgeable and helpful. Those fall into the “nice-to-have” category.

The real driver of a successful brand is your ability to make your clients successful. You aren't just a bystander; you are a contributor to your clients' success.

To be meaningful, a brand must be “for someone.” No brand can try to be everything for everyone and hope to be successful.

### 4. High visibility

Are you widely known to your target audience? Are they aware that you not only exist but that you are also relevant to your clients' success? Are they also aware of your reputation?

Our research shows that this is the area where many professional services firms fall short. They may have excellent reputations among their clients and be seen as driving success, but their visibility only extends to a portion of their target audience.

This is particularly a problem when you have too many target audiences. It's hard to reach everyone in multiple target audiences at the same time — and with sufficient visibility to make you successful.

### 5. A premium position

You can have all of the criteria we mentioned above and still fall short of your potential. To be truly successful, a brand must have something of a premium position. Without a premium brand perception, your firm will not be in a position to command premium fees.

While you can achieve a lot of success as an average priced firm, there are limits. If people perceive your firm as the most successful at solving client problems and the best place to build a career, you will likely need to be seen as charging premium fees.

If you don't charge a premium, people may start asking questions. What's wrong with your firm? If you really are that good, you should command a premium. After all, that's what the most successful brands do.

How successful is your brand? With these five factors in place the answer should be "very successful."

Now let's turn our attention to developing your strategy for building your brand.



### Need some help?

Hinge offers a comprehensive suite of marketing and branding services to increase your visibility and grow your firm.

**Let's explore how we can help:**  
[branding@hingemarketing.com](mailto:branding@hingemarketing.com)

703 391 8870 | [hingemarketing.com](http://hingemarketing.com)

DEVELOPING



BRAND BUILDING  
**STRATEGY**

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**Chapter 3**

The Psychology of Brand Strength



**Chapter 4**

How the Digital Revolution Changes Brand Building



**Chapter 5**

The Top 5 Brand Building Strategies

# the **psychology** of brand strength

## CHAPTER

# 3

If you are interested in increasing the brand strength of your firm, there is someone you need to meet. His name is Edward Thorndike.

You may remember him from Psych 101 as a pioneer in educational psychology. In 1915 he published a paper in which he identified an unusual problem.

### **The Halo Effect**

Thorndike discovered that when people rate someone on one trait it is correlated with their ratings on other traits. Put another way, people tend to see a person's performance as all good or all bad. This phenomenon has come to be called the "Halo Effect."

While Thorndike saw the Halo Effect as a source of measurement bias in his research, the savvy marketer will recognize it as the foundation of the modern concept of brands. When we develop a favorable impression from interacting with one partner at a firm, we tend to view the whole firm in a favorable light. Our impression of that firm's brand is strengthened.

Not surprisingly, it can also work in the other direction. Unfavorable impressions are also generalized via the "Devil Effect."



## The Importance of Brand Strength

The concept of a strong brand is something that we all understand on a very intuitive level. From our own experience we know that firms with high brand strength do better in the marketplace, whether they need new clients, business partners or employees.

In Chapter 1, we define brand strength as the combination of a firm's reputation and its visibility. Firms that have better reputations coupled with higher visibility have stronger brands.

High visibility alone won't build your brand. Does any experienced professional services marketer believe that full-page display ads by themselves strengthen your brand?

Similarly, a great reputation that few people know about may produce client loyalty and a handful of referrals but not much else. An unknown brand is not a strong brand.

Firms with high brand strength do better in the marketplace, whether they need new clients, business partners or employees.

## Increasing Brand Strength

So how do you increase your firm's brand strength?

Well, just telling everyone that you have a great reputation obviously won't do it. It's not believable. So demonstrate it, instead.

But demonstrating your reputation across every possible service delivered to every possible industry is an almost impossible task (not to mention expensive). What's a marketer to do?

Here is where Professor Thorndike and his Halo Effect come to your rescue.

Your firm doesn't need to be the best at everything. You just need to be the best at *something*, and the Halo Effect will help pull the rest of your services forward. Similarly, you don't need to be highly visible to everyone. But you do need to have a strong presence somewhere. From that starting point your brand strength can grow.



## Why Firms Fail

It seems almost too simple. Yet firm after firm fails to use this simple insight to build brand strength. Instead, they divide their marketing budget across all their offerings and target every possible client with the same intensity. By trying to be everything to everyone they end up being nothing to anyone.

The Halo Effect does not help these firms build stronger brands. Instead, it reinforces an impression that they are nothing special. They allow themselves to become a commodity and are reduced to competing on price alone.

## A Better Approach

A better approach would be to focus on an industry in which you have a clear strength and a service where you can gain a true advantage. By devoting your resources to becoming the best in that segment you have a reasonable opportunity to develop a strong reputation and high visibility.

From that island of brand strength, you can more easily expand. Add additional services and move to additional industries where your visibility can be leveraged.

And yes, we're fully aware of the political perils of focusing marketing efforts on a limited set of targets. Internal partner politics can foil a great strategy. But the alternative is not very appealing.

In our ongoing studies of high growth professional services firms, we found that they tend to have a much clearer, more narrow focus than their average growth peers. In short, they have the good Professor Thorndike on their side.

But the art and science of brand building is changing. Blame it on the digital revolution. The next chapter of this guide will help you keep up with it.



# how the digital **revolution** changes brand building

## CHAPTER

# 4

Whether you are prepared for it or not, there is a wave of change ready to break. The world of professional services marketing is about to change in ways that many folks have not anticipated.

There will be new winners and new losers. Some firms will rise to reshape the industry. And it is likely to happen very quickly.

Some people believe that professional services are inherently local. You must be face to face to build trust and provide service — ergo professional services will always be local.

As it turns out, there is another path to trust. That path involves building credibility and trust through sharing valuable content and expertise online.

### **Here are the factors driving that change:**

#### **1. Technology is making it possible**

With the speed and low cost of digital communications, everyone can communicate easily and inexpensively. The distance barrier is rapidly eroding. And it is not just voice and written communications. Today, you can Skype with someone if you want to look them in the eye.

#### **2. Digital natives are taking over**

Anyone entering the workforce within the last 10 years (and that is a lot of folks) has grown up with digital technology. To think technology is not impacting the way people search for professional services providers is to deny reality.



And young professionals are not the only ones adopting digital thinking. All ages and demographics are “Googling” their way through their workday, searching for advice, education, recommendations and potential vendors.

Think your buyers are different? They never search online? Don’t kid yourself. If they aren’t searching for services themselves, they are delegating the task to someone who is less senior and more comfortable online. Someone is checking you out, even if you don’t know it. We see it literally every day in the professional services marketplace.

### 3. The time-pressured executive

Today everyone seems to be under increasing time pressure. Do more with less. Do it faster.

Forget the leisurely networking lunch. Give it to me now. Email it over. Google the issue and get an instant answer. This trend toward instant gratification obviously favors the digital mode.

### 4. Free education expected

Got an issue of importance on the horizon? Go online and research it.

The expectation is that someone on the internet is going to explain it to you and educate you for free.

More and more, offering free education is the way professional services firms establish their expertise and attract new clients. And it is working.

In a recent study of online marketing for professional services firms,<sup>1</sup> we found that 77% of firms are generating business online. Importantly, those firms generating 40% or more leads online grow 4X faster than those that do not get clients from the digital world. Now that is a true competitive advantage!

### 5. Expectation of transparency

People have come to expect a level of information and transparency like never before. They expect to understand and evaluate your firm online.

More and more, offering free education is the way professional services firms establish their expertise and attract new clients. And it is working.

<sup>1</sup> [www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/online\\_marketing\\_research\\_study/#](http://www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/online_marketing_research_study/#)

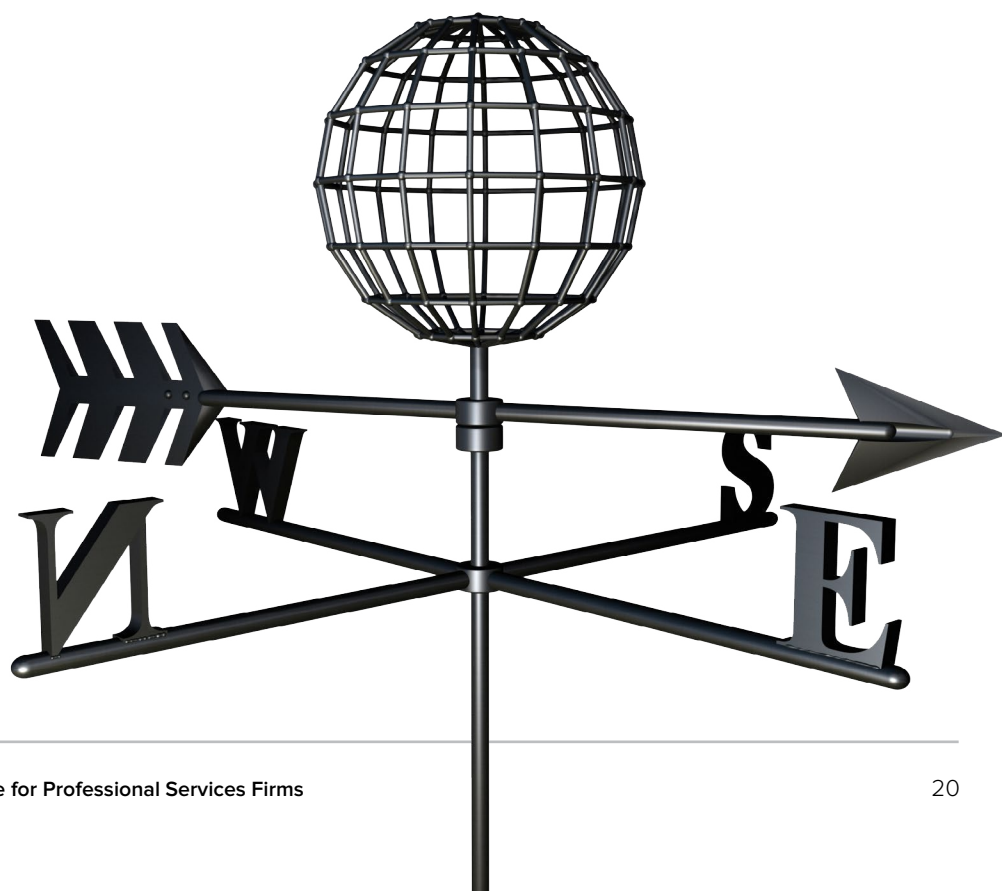
What is your reputation? What is the buzz about your new service? Who works there? How do you approach a client with the same issues I'm experiencing?

If they don't find what they're looking for, it's easy to move on. The next firm is just a click away. Why deal with someone who has something to hide?

When you step back and consider the magnitude of these changes it is easy to see that the traditional model of professional services marketing must change.

Competition is going global (or at least national or regional) for more and more professional services. People are getting increasingly comfortable dealing with professional services providers in other locations. Specialists and experts of every sort are making themselves accessible.

How will your firm adapt? What strategies will you employ to stay competitive and build your brand? Let's turn to what's working best today.



# the **top 5** brand building strategies

## CHAPTER

# 5



It's hard to overestimate the value of a strong brand for a professional services firm. It can help you win new clients, command premium fees and attract and retain the very best talent. But how do you do it?

What are the best brand building strategies for your firm? Let's start by defining what a brand building strategy is, and then we'll describe how it works.

### **Brand building strategy defined**

As you may recall from Chapter 1, we define the strength of a professional services brand as a firm's reputation times its visibility within its target client group.

There is one additional dimension of a brand to consider: its relevance to the target client group. A firm that is not seen as offering services that are relevant to solving important client issues will tend to have a weaker brand.

When viewed in this light, an effective brand building strategy will help firms improve their reputation, increase their relevance and increase their visibility to the target client. The best strategy is to do all three.

## Top brand building strategies

Here are our top five strategies for effectively increasing the strength of your brand.

### 1. Content marketing

Content marketing involves providing a steady stream of useful information to potential clients or influencers. Think educational rather than promotional. It addresses relevance, reputation and visibility.

Over time, potential clients learn how you approach problems and develop trust in your firm. When they need assistance, your firm is at the top of their list.

Content marketing relies on winning clients by sharing something of value rather than trying to persuade or “sell” them. As such, it is a great way to build a brand and generate leads.

### 2. Develop Visible Experts<sup>SM</sup>.

Many firms have experts, but few of them go on to become well known and influential among their target client group. We call these fortunate few Visible Experts<sup>SM</sup>. By deliberately developing one or more of these high-profile experts, a firm can dramatically increase the power of its brand.

The strength of a Visible Expert’s personal brand transfers to the entire firm by virtue of the “Halo Effect” we described in Chapter 3. In the same way, as a university becomes more prestigious when it has a Nobel Prize winning faculty member, so too a professional services firm benefits by having a nationally known, high-profile expert on its team.



<sup>1</sup> [www.hingemarketing.com/blog/story/branding\\_tools\\_for\\_the\\_visible\\_expert8480](http://www.hingemarketing.com/blog/story/branding_tools_for_the_visible_expert8480)

### 3. Cultivate prestigious partners

Partnering with prominent organizations to take on important projects is another proven strategy for building your professional services brand. Large, well-known businesses, trade associations or universities are all good partnering candidates.

By partnering, we are not talking about sponsoring events. While sponsorships are frequently thought of as a brand building strategy, they can be more costly and less effective than a project partnership.

Instead, consider conducting a research project together or starting a special educational program. An innovative, high-profile project is more distinctive than your logo on a crowded sponsorship banner — and is a far more powerful brand building strategy.

### 4. Seek high profile clients and case stories

There are many successful professional services firms that have built their reputations on a single name-brand client or a well-known case study. But if you systematically seek out high-profile clients and invest in producing dramatic results that can be widely shared, that's a great brand building strategy.

Of course, everyone wants prestigious clients and great results. But surprisingly few firms do the planning and investment to turn that desire into reality.

For example, a firm may land a name-brand client, but if their contract prevents them from promoting their work, a brand building opportunity is lost. Or similarly, a firm may focus on staying within scope rather than investing in the engagement to produce exceptional results. If you make high-profile results a deliberate brand building strategy, those mistakes are less likely.

One of the most highly leveraged brand building strategies available to professional services firms today is based on the growth of social media.

### 5. Dominate the social media space

One of the most highly leveraged brand building strategies available to professional services firms today is based on the growth of social media. Businesses of all types are becoming regular users of social tools such as LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube.

But just participating in social media is not enough. Many, many firms and individuals do that. Instead, we are talking about investing the resources to have a dominant presence.

There's a real strategic opportunity here because adoption of social media by professional services firms is still in its early stages. It is still possible to become a major online voice within many target client groups. Many small firms and solo professionals are managing to establish strong online brands in this way.

While traditional face-to-face networking is still important, consider the time and cost savings associated with an online approach. The strongest brands are everywhere your target client looks, and they are respected by everyone they talk to. A strong social media presence is a great strategy to make that happen.

### The best brand building strategy

In most cases, the best overall brand building strategy is one that combines several of these top strategies. For example, a content marketing strategy is a natural fit with a strong social media presence. Social media becomes a perfect way to spread the content, and the content makes great fuel for online discussions.

It is still possible to become a major online voice within many target client groups.

And, of course, these winning strategies complement traditional brand building strategies. Face-to-face networking or trade show marketing work well with any of these strategies.

Build your brand and you will build your business. But remember, no strategy is effective unless it's implemented. That's where we turn our attention next.



### Want to do it yourself?

From step-by-step How-Tos to in-depth courses, Hinge University will give you the skills and know-how to elevate your brand.

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IMPLEMENTING



BRAND BUILDING

# STRATEGY

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## Chapter 6

Using the Strategic Marketing Process to Build Your Brand



## Chapter 7

The Top 10 Branding Tools



## Chapter 8

Top Brand Building Blunders to Avoid

# using the **strategic** marketing process to build your brand

## CHAPTER

# 6

If you're like many professional services executives, the whole concept of a strategic marketing process may seem a bit alien. Even for classically trained marketers, concepts such as the marketing mix or distribution channels can seem out of place in a professional services context.

And it's no wonder. The classic strategic marketing process models were developed for advertising-driven consumer products. Professional services are quite different in their nature and how they are marketed.

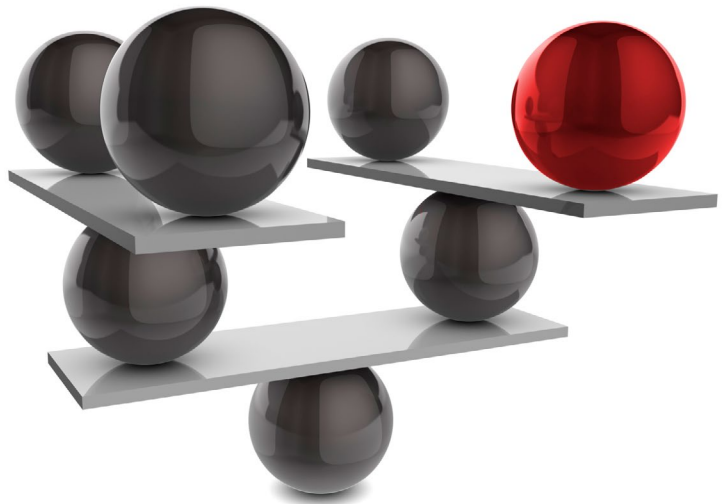
What we need is a process tailored to the realities of modern professional services firms. Try this process on for size.

### Strategic marketing process defined

The strategic marketing process is how you align your firm's overall strategy with your day-to-day business development efforts. It allows growth to be driven by a deliberate strategy.

For many firms, growth is a result of luck and individual partner efforts. Marketing is often reactive and short term oriented. "Hey, we were just asked to sponsor a golf event. Should we do it?" or "We need some new clients. Let's send out a mailing describing our service offerings." You get the picture.

We all want to grow our firms. But how can you do it strategically?



## A Practical Alternative for Professional Services Firms

We recommend a simple, 10-step strategic marketing process.

### 1. Decide on the overall goals of the firm

What kind of a firm do you want or need to have? How much growth? Do you want to double in size in 5 years, for example? Firms with clear strategies, built on strong differentiators, tend to grow faster and are more profitable.

### 2. Look at where you are already strong

What industry verticals do you already have strength in? What kind of services are you good at delivering? Where do you offer the most value and enjoy the greatest success? Most established firms have a large number of industry/service combinations to consider, since growth has often been opportunistic.

### 3. Consider which industries have the most promising long-term prospects for your firm

They may or may not be high growth industries (although growth is important to consider). This step may take some basic secondary market research,<sup>1</sup> which is not hard to do.

### 4. Consider which services you are best prepared to offer today

What do you excel at already? By now, you may have several promising alternatives. Most firms do. There may be some industries in which you have deep experience and strong staffing. They may feel like an obvious choice. Or you may have a service that delivers greater value than competitors.

But don't decide which to prioritize just yet. The next step will set you apart because so few firms do it.

Firms with clear  
strategies, built on strong  
differentiators, tend to  
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profitable.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/spiraling\\_up\\_create\\_a\\_high\\_growth\\_high\\_value\\_professional\\_services\\_firm](http://www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/spiraling_up_create_a_high_growth_high_value_professional_services_firm)

### 5. Research the best possibilities

Do some structured research on possible target client groups. We recommend how to approach this research in our new Research Guide.<sup>1</sup> This research will identify not only your best short-term opportunities (a.k.a. “low hanging fruit”), it will also point to new services that you can offer in the future. You will also understand what messages you need to communicate and which hurdles you will have to overcome.

### 6. Choose your high priority target client groups

By now you should have a good fix on which industries and services are the most likely to yield success if you concentrate on them. For some firms, prioritizing and focusing marketing efforts will be a cultural shift, so be prepared for some pushback.

### 7. Develop your marketing strategy and plan to reach those target audiences

For most firms this will be a mixture of traditional approaches, such as networking and trade association activity, and newer online approaches such as content marketing and social media.

The point is to accelerate both your visibility and reputation within your target groups and those that influence them. Think opinion leaders and referral sources.

### 8. Put your measurement tools in place

You’ll want to know how the strategy is working. Start to track contacts (email list size, for example), referrals, leads, proposals and wins as a starting place.

But you may also want to track visibility (e.g., keyword searches on targeted terms, press mentions, social media reach and the like) to monitor the strength of your brand within the target group.

### 9. Implement your strategy

The strategic marketing process falls flat if you don’t actually implement your strategy. Yes, it is hard. But implementing it separates the winners from the losers!

### 10. Review and adjust

We recommend monitoring your progress each month. Are you actually doing what you planned to do? Is it having the desired impact?

<sup>1</sup> [www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/hinges\\_professional\\_services\\_guide\\_to\\_research#](http://www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/hinges_professional_services_guide_to_research#)

Each quarter, take a look at the cumulative results. Is your marketing working the way you projected? You can make adjustments at that point.

Finally, conduct your annual review in conjunction with planning and budgeting. If you have been implementing a solid plan for a year and the needle is not moving, you need to consider a new strategy.

The beauty of this strategic marketing process is that it keeps your firm focused on strategic growth. That is important because strategic growth adds much more value to a firm than the unfocused or undisciplined growth that can occur in the absence of a strategic marketing process.

It's a beautiful thing when a strategy comes together.



### Need some help?

Hinge offers a comprehensive suite of marketing and branding services to increase your visibility and grow your firm.

Let's explore how we can help:  
[branding@hingemarketing.com](mailto:branding@hingemarketing.com)

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# the **top 10** branding tools

## CHAPTER

# 7

Now let's take a closer look at some of the top brand building tools.

If you are an industry veteran, you probably already know the value of having a strong professional services brand. The question is, how do you build a leading brand?

That's where branding tools come into play.

### **Branding Tools Defined**

A branding tool is a technique that helps you build and refine your firm's reputation or increase the visibility of that reputation. The best branding tools somehow manage to do both at the same time.

Here's our list of the Top 10 hottest branding tools for a professional services firm.

#### **1. Write the definitive book on your signature topic**

This requires that you know your stuff.

Note that the book should be written for clients, not fellow professional practitioners. If you make a complicated topic easy to understand and appreciate, you'll be seen as a leader by the people who matter most.

#### **2. Produce a signature-quality video**

Increasingly, people don't read—they watch. For the cost of an impressive brochure, you can produce a memorable signature video that tells the story of your firm and positions you as a leading brand.

Don't skimp on the production budget. A ho-hum, talking-head sales piece doesn't impress. Do it right or not at all.



Check out these [video pricing guidelines](http://www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/what-is-the-cost-of-video-production-for-the-web/) to help you set a realistic budget:  
[www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/what-is-the-cost-of-video-production-for-the-web/](http://www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/what-is-the-cost-of-video-production-for-the-web/)

### 3. Develop a must-read industry blog

Make sure your blog is something that potential clients and referral sources want to read — having a blog just to have one won't cut it. Start by defining a clear blog strategy.

Publish frequently and give your blog some features that stand out. Think of your blog as an online magazine, with topics and features that people talk about and share with colleagues and friends.

A top-quality blog will help build online visibility as well as attract search engine traffic to your website. Over time it can position your firm as a leading brand, so don't hesitate to get the help you need to do it well.

### 4. Publish a provocative industry newsletter

Not sure if a blog is right for you? Focus on a newsletter instead.

More traditional than a blog, a newsletter provides critical industry insight and information that is not easily available elsewhere. Your newsletter's particular slant can convey your perspective on the industry you serve.

This type of industry-focused newsletter is a proven brand-building tool. But to succeed as such, your newsletter must be robust and useful—it has to clearly stand out from the usual firm-centered fluff piece.

### 5. Organize a specialized industry conference

Conference participation is a proven way to build a brand. Speaking and sponsorships are both tried and true.

But you want to be a leader. Why not be bold and develop your own specialized conference?

Let's say your IT firm handles cloud computing security, and you have a lot of customers in the health care industry. Instead of presenting a panel at a health care conference, organize an entirely separate event centered on your topic.

Set a clear focus on an emerging niche that is not currently addressed. Keep the conference small and specific at first, bringing in as many partners as needed to make it successful. As the conference grows, so will your brand strength.

### 6. Conduct a groundbreaking research project

Does a major question remain unanswered in the industry you serve? Do people understand their competitors well, or is perception foggy at best? Industry players rarely conduct research on their own, and when they do, they usually keep it proprietary.

As a service provider to the industry, you have more freedom. Do the research, share the results widely, and you will strengthen your brand.

### 7. Initiate an awards program

People love to be recognized. What's more, when they receive an award, they love to publicize the fact.

Put these two tendencies to work for your firm. Create your own awards program to recognize companies in the industry you serve.

Make the awards relevant to the type of work that you do. For example, a UK-based firm named Valuable Content Ltd<sup>1</sup> helps companies create high-value content for their marketing efforts. They have created a program around a monthly Valuable Content Award.<sup>2</sup> As a proud recipient ourselves, we display their badge on our blog. Everybody benefits.

Consider partnering with an association or trade publication to increase visibility and participation in your program. You will simultaneously strengthen your reputation as a leading brand and increase your visibility among key players.

### 8. Start an industry index

The goal is to develop an index that is closely followed and widely cited. Perhaps it's based on industry "confidence" or "backlog" or even "sales activity." By establishing the industry's standard index, your firm becomes a leader.

Let's say that you serve the chain restaurant industry. Start by recruiting a research panel of top restaurant chains. Have the panel members report average tickets and total diners each month. Standardize the information and report on it widely as the "[insert name of your firm] Dining Out Index." Eventually, everyone in the industry will receive a monthly reminder that your firm is a leader.



<sup>1</sup> [www.valuablecontent.co.uk/](http://www.valuablecontent.co.uk/)

<sup>2</sup> [www.hingemarketing.com/about/news/hinge\\_linkedin\\_group\\_named\\_valuable\\_content\\_award\\_winner](http://www.hingemarketing.com/about/news/hinge_linkedin_group_named_valuable_content_award_winner)



### 9. Cultivate more Visible Experts™<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps you have some very talented experts within the ranks of your firm (and what firm doesn't?). Consider dramatically increasing these people's personal visibility.

There are several routes to this goal—think in terms of books, publications, speaking engagements, etc.

The key point is that by increasing the visibility of these experts, you also increase the profile of the firm they are associated with. Having one superstar expert is notable, but having three world-class experts makes yours a superstar firm.

### 10. Create a high-profile interview series

Let's say that you market your services to CIOs. Imagine that you set up video interviews with the most visible CIOs from the entire industry you serve. Now all these high-profile CIOs know your firm.

Other CIOs are interested in what the leading CIOs have to say; now they are also exposed to your firm.

Everyone assumes that your firm knows a great deal about CIOs (which it does). In short, your brand benefits from others' credibility and visibility. The result is a strengthening of your brand.

Share the full videos, excerpts, summaries, etc. in a variety of formats to maximize your overall visibility.

Each of these branding tools can help to reposition your firm, improve its reputation, and increase its visibility. While some of the techniques may be time consuming and can require an ongoing investment, the benefits they return are typically substantial. It's what leading professional services brands do.

But when it comes to implementing a successful brand-building strategy there are some pitfalls to avoid. We'll look at those next.

The key point is that by increasing the visibility of these experts, you also increase the profile of the firm they are associated with.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.hingemarketing.com/blog/story/branding\\_tools\\_for\\_the\\_visible\\_expert8480](http://www.hingemarketing.com/blog/story/branding_tools_for_the_visible_expert8480)

# top branding **blunders** to avoid

## CHAPTER

# 8

Whether you are developing a brand new brand (brand launch) or updating and repositioning an existing brand (re-branding), there are several common blunders that can cost you dearly. Falling prey to them can kill the effectiveness of your subsequent brand building efforts and waste precious time and money.

Let's begin with a definition of brand development and see how brand building fits in.

### **Brand Development Defined**

Brand development, as we discussed earlier, is the process of creating or updating a professional services brand. It typically involves three phases.



**Getting the brand strategy right.** The opening phase often involves client and target audience research, brand positioning and brand messaging architecture.

**Creating the brand communication tools.** In this phase, a firm develops a new identity and business development tools, such as a name, logo, tagline, stationary, website, marketing collateral, proposal templates, and a content marketing strategy.

**Building the newly developed brand.** Here, marketing plans, internal staff training, and a wide range of promotional techniques are brought into play to increase the visibility of the brand with target audiences (from potential new clients to referral sources and prospective new hires) and shape the firm's reputation.

A flawed foundation makes  
for a poor structure.

The brand development process can be daunting. The payoff is huge and the costs are significant, so the stakes are high. That's all the more reason to avoid costly blunders.

Here is our list of the top 10 mistakes made by firms trying to build a strong brand. You'll notice that many of these mistakes occur early in the brand development process, well before you start brand building. A flawed foundation makes for a poor structure.

## Top 10 Brand Building Blunders

### 1. No differentiators

If there is no difference between what you say about your firm and what competitors say about their firms, you have a weak brand. Unfortunately, this can have a negative impact on your firm's growth and profitability. High growth firms are 3X more likely to have a strong, easy-to-understand differentiator.<sup>1</sup>

Here is a quick test to see if you have a true differentiator. Think of some way you believe your firm is different. Then ask if a potential competitor could ever say the opposite. If the answer is "no," it is probably not a good differentiator. By the way, having great people and offering great client service don't pass this test.

<sup>1</sup> [www.hingemarketing.com/spiralingup](http://www.hingemarketing.com/spiralingup)

## 2. Trying to be everything to everyone

This typically results in being nothing special to anyone. Many firms head in this direction because they believe that offering more services creates more opportunities. In fact, they are making it much more difficult to attract new business. Having a clear focus or specialization is another attribute of high growth firms.<sup>1</sup>

## 3. Failure to understand what a brand is

Your brand is not your name or logo or mission statement. It is more about how the outside world (especially potential clients or employees) sees you. Think of it as your reputation. Another dimension of brand is how visible you are in the marketplace. Together, these two elements — reputation and visibility — comprise the essence of your brand. As such it truly impacts just about everything you do. This leads directly to the next blunder.

## 4. Not realizing that your brand is your most important asset

With a strong brand, a firm can replace people, modify service offerings, or even change client segments with the full expectation that they can continue to enjoy success. The firm can be bought and sold on the strength of its brand in the marketplace. A professional services brand can be a tremendously valuable asset and should be treated as such. Failing to invest in brand development is short sighted and costly in the long run.

## 5. Branding in a blindfold

Let's face it, we all think we understand our clients and competitors. But we're usually wrong — dangerously wrong. In virtually every research study we conduct into our clients, we find that internal staff and partners have a distorted view of what their clients really think. A recent study<sup>2</sup> showed that firms that conduct systematic research on their target clients grow faster and are more profitable.

## 6. Making brand development a battleground for other issues

Sadly, many firms turn brand development into a battleground over the future of the firm. For instance, a simple logo decision can become a protracted battle over unresolved issues. Brand development is difficult enough in its own right. Don't burden it with unresolved issues around firm direction or control.

<sup>1</sup> [www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/high\\_growth\\_professional\\_services\\_firm\\_how\\_some\\_firms\\_grow\\_in\\_any\\_market](http://www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/high_growth_professional_services_firm_how_some_firms_grow_in_any_market)

<sup>2</sup> [www.hingemarketing.com/blog/story/online\\_marketing\\_research\\_study\\_digital\\_marketing\\_delivers\\_faster\\_growth\\_an](http://www.hingemarketing.com/blog/story/online_marketing_research_study_digital_marketing_delivers_faster_growth_an)

### 7. Aiming too low

Good brands are both real and aspirational. They stand for something that people can get behind and support. Try to be the leader in something or you will offer little reason for a prospect to choose your firm over another. Standing for something helps you build a strong brand.

### 8. Making a promise you can't keep

The flip side of aiming too low is offering a brand promise that you can't deliver on. Overpromising will cost you credibility and trust. There is a fine line between being aspirational and being unrealistic. People will forgive you for aiming high and falling short of perfection if you are better than others. But if you are aiming high but only deliver a mediocre product, don't expect much understanding.

### 9. Forgetting online branding

The world of professional services is changing. People are learning about your firm in ways they never did before. Don't make the mistake of focusing on traditional approaches to branding while ignoring online marketing's growing role in brand development. The future of branding is digital, so plan for it in your strategy, brand building and rollout.<sup>1</sup>

### 10. The "me too" mistake

Fitting in with the rest of your competitors is not a sound strategy: "They use blue, I'll use blue." "Every government contractor has a flag and a capitol dome, so I should too." While adopting attributes of your competitors may feel safer, it is actually playing with fire. It's hard enough to tell most professional services firms apart. Don't make it worse on your prospective clients. If you can't be completely different, at least look and sound a bit different. It won't hurt, and it will probably make your firm easier to recognize and remember.

As you retool your firm for the future, try to avoid these 10 brand building blunders. Your firm's prospects look better already!

For more information and tips, check out the branding and marketing resources in the Additional Resources section of this guide or visit the Hinge library on our website: [www.hingemarketing.com/library](http://www.hingemarketing.com/library).

<sup>1</sup> [www.hingemarketing.com/blog/story/top\\_5\\_brand\\_building\\_strategies\\_for\\_professional\\_services\\_firms](http://www.hingemarketing.com/blog/story/top_5_brand_building_strategies_for_professional_services_firms)

# CONCLUSION

Because your professional services brand is so central to the ongoing success of your firm it should be a matter of ongoing focus and investment. In reality, it rarely is.

In an odd way, that's the good news.

Because so few competitors are giving brand building the attention it requires, you have a great opportunity to benefit and gain a meaningful competitive advantage.

Your firm can be the one that attracts the best clients, the most talented team, and the strongest business partners. You can charge the premium fees and enjoy the highest valuation.

All in all, that's not a bad prospect.

We're here to help make that a reality.

The Hinge Team

# about HINGE

Hinge specializes in branding and marketing for professional services firms. We are a leader in helping them grow faster and maximize value.

Our comprehensive offerings include research and strategy, brand building, award-winning creative, high performance websites and marketing outsourcing.

Hinge conducts groundbreaking research on professional service companies. We have identified a group of firms that grow 9X faster and are 50% more profitable yet spend less than average to get new business. We can show you how they do it and help you implement their strategies in your firm.

To view our full library of research reports, executive guides, webinars and articles, please visit [www.hingemarketing.com/library](http://www.hingemarketing.com/library).

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703.391.8870

1851 Alexander Bell Drive, Suite 350

Reston, VA 20191

## Help Us Make this Guide Even Better

We want to hear from you. If you have any suggestions to improve this resource, please drop us a line: [info@hingemarketing.com](mailto:info@hingemarketing.com)

Thank you!

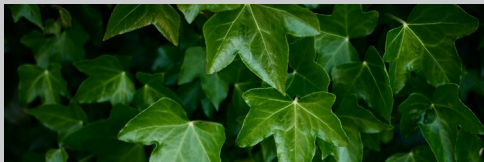
## Branding Program

Our Branding Program is designed to carry your firm's reputation confidently into the marketplace by giving you a suite of powerful branding tools. Based on extensive research and analysis, our branding strategies increase your firm's credibility and visibility in your industry. The services will also differentiate your firm and provide clear, compelling messages for each of your target audiences.

For more information, call **703 391 8870** or email us at [info@hingemarketing.com](mailto:info@hingemarketing.com).

## Take the Next Step

Choose the option that's right for you.



### Want to do it yourself?

From step-by-step How-Tos to in-depth courses, Hinge University will give you the skills and know-how to elevate your brand.

**Check out Hinge University:**  
[HingeUniversity.com](http://HingeUniversity.com)

OR



### Need some help?

Hinge offers a comprehensive suite of marketing and branding services to increase your visibility and grow your firm.

**Let's explore how we can help:**  
[branding@hingemarketing.com](mailto:branding@hingemarketing.com)