

Punch above you

Tim Collins looks at marketing on a budget and shares the lessons he's learnt over his career, including 16 years as practice director of a barristers chambers.

This article originally appeared in *PM* magazine. For further details go to www.pmforum.co.uk

Although you may not be a qualified lawyer, accountant, architect (insert name of adviser) you are professional. So my key advice is to work with your colleagues as peers and believe that you do make an equal and positive contribution. To do this you have to be confident about what you know and in your abilities. As well as wise enough to know when you need help.

I was part of a panel at a PM Forum event in September when we shared different perspectives on this topic. Something we all agreed on was the benefit of being perceived as one step ahead – actually half a step will do

This article isn't about marketing strategy or marketing tactics – all our situations are different. All I can attempt to do is share some of my journey and a few of the lessons I've learnt along the way. For 16 years I was the Practice Director of No.6, a Barristers Chambers in Leeds where I was responsible for marketing.

Kiss

You'll all be familiar with KISS (Keep It Simple Stupid) but start with the real basics. Try to put yourself in your clients' shoes. The first thing I realised is that there were a number of different incoming phone lines and the phones would often be engaged or not answered. So I cut the extra numbers, installed a new phone system (with future capacity) and doubled the number of incoming lines. I set it up so the phones would cascade and all calls be answered at peak times by someone.

I went out to meet clients to listen to them and try to understand their needs. I met every barrister which enabled me to gain an understanding about their practice and their ideas on how it could be



We cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking that created them.

Einstein

developed.

Our branding and marketing materials were awful – so the bar was not set very high (no pun intended!). I set a budget for the business including marketing. The budget was tight but was approved. I looked at what our competitors were doing and set about trying to get the basics right.

Mind blowing decisions

It was plain our branding (6 Park Square with a line picture of the building) was as bad as that of many other chambers. So I developed a one-page brief that was approved by the management committee. I then briefed three agencies, paying them all a pitch fee, to come up with their concepts. I believed that one of the ideas was excellent and really stood out. A scoring sheet against the key brand propositions for the management committee was developed. I shuffled the ten or so options, instructed them not to discuss their thoughts – there were no right or wrong views. I gathered in their scores as they started to discuss their views. My preferred solution had the highest score by a country mile, then someone piped up that it reminded her of the AIDS ribbon logo. I simply explained that all the designs were open to interpre-

tation but that we had made an objective decision based on our agreed criteria. Additionally, from my marketing experience I praised their choice as, in my professional opinion, they had made the right decision

We rebranded as No.6, secured the domain name www.no6.co.uk and subsequently formed a management company for chambers – No.6 Limited. I just tried to keep things simple but aligned and consistent. Our branding stood out from the crowd and it was flattering to see how many chambers across the country starting adopting shorter names and new branding.

All together now

In professional services as in other sectors, 'The War for Talent' is critical. The ability of a firm to attract, develop and retain people is crucial. Chambers and firms have folded as a result of losing talented individuals and teams to rivals. Like others we wanted to expand and I was asked to run an advertisement in *Counsel Magazine*. The last quarter of the publication was stuffed with chambers' ads listing their members and inviting applications. They were often poorly laid out, crowded and bland. Most were quarter or half page ads. Some of the more progressive sets used colour but the majority were black and white.

So I negotiated for a right hand full page in colour. My idea was very simple: our logo in the top right hand corner; copy in 11 point in the middle "There is always space for the right people at No.6."; my contact details and chambers address at the bottom of the page. We grabbed attention and had a fabulous response. Barristers from other chambers approached our barristers in different court robing rooms to criticise it. It created a stir with a very simple message

our budget weight

we replicated on our website. One of the traps many firms fall into is trying to say too much and then our target audiences don't read or engage with our messages. If you have a very tight budget for a campaign you are far better getting one message across clearly and well. You have to be confident and focussed.

How recruitment is managed is also critical as many of the candidates we reject could either become potential clients and/or people to recruit in the future. We developed a very challenging but positive and professional recruitment process for chambers. It did require adjustments over the years, mainly based on candidate feedback. Candidates rejected after selection day, from the last full recruitment competition I ran, rated the process 9.1/10 on three key metrics: professionalism, fairness and how well they were listened to. Their comments included: "I thought the process was

conducted fairly from start to finish and have been impressed by the professionalism and openness of all those involved." "Brilliant interview process – I think you gave us the best opportunity to show who we are and what we can achieve." How we treat our staff and suppliers all feed in and affect our brand positioning. Often it is these things that filter out through the networks and shape how our firm is really perceived.

A good year for the roses

We used to share our premises with a firm of accountants. They had a great character, who apart from running payrolls for clients, had green fingers and nurtured the window boxes. Annually, we won multiple prizes in the city's Leeds in Bloom competition. Out of the blue, the Council approached me to gauge whether No.6 would be interested in sponsoring hanging baskets in the city centre.

Initially, I was very dubious but requested some details on costs and possible locations.

I couldn't believe our luck when I saw the map! I met with one of the directors and went to a conference room where I spread out the map and explained the idea. We circled our 24 target posts with military precision and much laughter.

Our striking No.6 logo duly appeared overnight: up and down both sides of the pedestrian area outside the Leeds Combined Court Centre; on the main road in front of the Town Hall Tavern and a rival chambers; as well as creating a splash outside Coverdale House.

The reaction from other chambers and solicitors was priceless.

I hate you so much right now

Do look at complaints to see if there are patterns. Nine times out of ten it is a communication issue and entrenched parties seem to dig in on their positions. Professionals hate their professionalism being criticised and this can often escalate. But we can also help to bring a positive resolution.

Complaints can genuinely be an opportunity, as I discovered when a partner of a significant Leeds firm was incandescent about the conduct of one of our counsel. I met with her and listened to her complaint. I asked whether this had happened before and this opened up an outpouring of how counsel didn't understand or respect solicitors and many were particularly inept with manging lay clients. She explained how she had trained on this topic nationally for the Law Society. I asked if she'd be willing to run a session in chambers for our counsel. From the risk of losing a key client this incident proved pivotal in cementing our relationship and generating significantly more work from her firm.



Top 10 tips for marketing on a budget

- 1 Market internally – as a co-professional and peer.
- 2 Look externally at your clients' experience.
- 3 Go for quick early wins to establish credibility.
- 4 Find, nurture and support your champions – intrapreneurs. Training.
- 5 Establish clear decision making processes.
- 6 React quickly to opportunities.
- 7 Work with and value great suppliers.
- 8 Be curious – look at ideas and trends in other industries and your competitors. Your training and development
- 9 Recruitment and complaints are great marketing opportunities.
- 10 Be willing to make mistakes, to learn and to apologise.
- 11 Give extra and stand out from the crowd.

Stop

The most effective leaders do three things:

- make time to step back and think;
- are curious and eager to continue learning;
- take purposeful steps – they #GoDo.

When we are all so busy it is really hard to stop and think but we'd be far more productive if we had the courage to stop. Creating good habits can be great but as Einstein reminded us: "Insanity = Doing the same thing repeatedly and yet expecting a different result". Too many organisations either repeat what they did the previous year and the programme rolls on. Classically, we all play to our strengths but in a small team that can seriously restrict our options. Try different things, test and pilot your ideas. But as well as working on your learning and development you also need to train and educate your fee earners.

Brilliant disguise

I organised a session on marketing for one of our annual chambers training weekends in Durham. I had a limited budget and knew what I wanted to achieve, so I hired an actor. I built him up as being a marketing guru from London and gave him an outline script. Many of the barristers winced as he trotted out clichés such as "blue sky thinking" and other irritating and overused buzzwords. We split them into groups and tasked them with devising marketing campaigns for one particular team. They came back and presented their ideas and critiqued each other's approaches. We had a great session, some heated discussions but we were able, in that one afternoon, to help gain a real insight into marketing. At the end when I revealed I had used an actor: they were stunned but had humour to understand why I had brought someone external in.

Over the years I invited real guest speakers to cover a broad range of topics. They brought very different perspectives but all referred, in some way, to how we could improve our communication. They were all thought provoking and I also took our Head of Chambers to listen to Tom Peters. Our colleagues' time is valuable so when you arrange some training for them make sure it is top quality.

I'm amazed that I don't see more fee earners at the PM Forum regional seminars. We need to champion marketing in our organisations and help to build understanding of marketing. I do not

think it is a coincidence that some of the most progressive firms have marketing savvy managing partners but also that they value and respect their marketing team.

Ch-ch-ch-changes

You may be familiar with the phrase "the only constant is change" and if you listen to the predictions of many we are entering a period of unprecedented change for the professions. This will undoubtedly increase the pressure on leadership, fee earners and on us. We should not just look to cope with change; to stay ahead of the market we need to embrace it. We also need to understand how we can affect it:



Unless the combination of the three elements on the left of the equation outweigh the perceived cost(s) to the individual or group – you'll be banging your head against a brick wall. Some in your firm will stubbornly resist change, no matter how hard you try, but others will be more progressive. Work with and develop your champions, enlist their support first for your new ideas. But keep your eyes and ears open and don't get drawn into internal politics.

Hungry heart

At this year's PM Forum Conference, Paul English highlighted the 5 S's underpinning Grant Thornton's marketing strategy, originally identified by McKinsey: Science; Substance; Speed; Simplicity and Storytelling. It takes considerable time and resources to develop this type of thinking and the work to underpin it. But we can learn from and adapt this into our firms.

In summary: be honest, be yourself and when you make a mistake admit it and apologise. Keep agile, positive, externally focussed, learning, creative and when the fun stops...



Tim Collins is Director of The Tim Collins Consultancy. As well as coaching, Tim consults on leadership and business development. He is the PM Forum North West Regional Director and was an accredited

GrowthAccelerator coach.