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Walking the talk

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Perusing law firms' corporate communication materials and browsing their websites is a pretty mundane pastime. In truth there are only so many ways in which even the most eloquent of wordsmiths can say the same thing over and over and over again. Taken at face value we live in a world inhabited by lawyers who are businesspeople in disguise, wholly commercial in their approach and clear communicators, getting to the core of the issue immediately, charging transparently and delivering to deadlines. All of this is surrounded by a 'service wrapper' that promises an experience like no other; indeed, one so good that the client will look forward to engaging their lawyers on a regular basis!

The source of this convergence of messages is clear. Firms and their marketing agencies have been investing in research to understand what clients value. The results of this research are then played back as a series of promises by the communications department in a seemingly neat resolution of the 'what do we say to appeal to clients?' conundrum. In simple terms, we simply tell them what they want to hear.

Of course, this approach is largely twaddle – a series of vacuous statements without substance. Unless a firm has put in place the operational mechanism by which it can consistently walk the talk of such promises, these are optimistic assertions at best and plain misleading at worst.

We have reached the point at which clients don't believe the hype until they experience the service, or at the very least, until someone they know and trust has had that first-hand experience and is prepared to confirm that promise and reality are closely aligned.

This means that the leadership team needs to be clear about the marketing messages that it sends and to ensure that the firm can meet this benchmark consistently by managing the servicedelivery process far more actively than ever before. Close attention must be paid to developing the systems, processes and people skills that will ultimately determine the service quality received, and so shape the client's experience. All of this takes time and money, both of which are in short supply.

As a starting point, it is often illuminating to consider the points at which the client and the firm interact – the touch points – and evaluate how these shape perceptions of the organisation. In reality, it is at these interfaces that the client forms a view of quality, service delivery and value for money. The touch point map provides some strong clues about where to deploy efforts and in which order. Manage touch points well, and positive goodwill will flow. Ignore them at your peril. No matter how slick the back-office systems may be, the client experience will be sub-optimal if the interface is not controlled.

Getting touch points right is often about doing the simple things well – telephone answering, billing processes, reception etiquette, meeting room demeanour, consistency of documentation, promptness of response and clarity of language.

This is an effective way in which service perception can be changed at modest cost. Of course, it is not a substitute for more fundamental changes within the firm but it does provide some immediate solutions for a firm that is struggling with longer-term business realignment.

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Hedley Consulting advises the leadership teams of professional service firms on business development and change strategies that deliver immediate and sustainable improvements in business performance.