

New York Law Journal



Web address: <http://www.nylj.com>

VOLUME 234—NO. 4

THURSDAY, JULY 7, 2005

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L A W F I R M M A R K E T I N G

Lessons for Lawyers From Belvedere Vodka

BY SPENCER Z. BARETZ

When Belvedere Vodka launched in 1996, it started an industry revolution. Belvedere positioned itself as the first ever “luxury vodka,” priced itself 30 percent higher than the highest priced vodka at the time (Absolut), and set into motion an elaborate, multi-faceted marketing campaign to put the brand on the map. In so doing, Belvedere sought to create a “super-premium” class of vodka, upping the established “premium” class of brands known to American consumers.

Industry experts thought the company’s founder, Eddie Phillips, was a lunatic. They were incredulous, dubious, skeptical...and wrong! Belvedere is now widely regarded as the Rolls Royce of vodkas.

Why should lawyers care about Belvedere and its story? Because Belvedere’s marketing strategy can teach lawyers some valuable lessons about marketing their own practices.

The First of Its Kind

Belvedere was able to obtain traction early on because it positioned itself as “a first” on several fronts. It touted itself as the first ever “luxury vodka.” It was the first vodka to be priced at \$30 a bottle. It was the first to label itself as “super-premium” vodka. While vodka itself as a product

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was certainly not a first, Belvedere positioned itself as an innovator, creating entirely new categories within a defined market in an attempt to make its brand stand out from the pack. This strategy made people—certain targeted individuals and groups in defined markets—take notice. The media and consumers, always on the lookout for the “next best thing,” ate this up. Belvedere boomed.

In his acclaimed book “The 10 Immutable Laws of Marketing,” Al Ries championed this idea and explained its power: “Being first in any category is going to give you the edge—being the leader comes from being first...Once you are the leader, a position mostly gained by being first, it is pretty hard for competitors to dislodge you, as long as you keep your products up to date and of comparable quality.”

Legal Firsts

In the legal profession, there are many successful examples of “firsts” which have been instrumental in the growth and success of lawyers and firms: Famed corporate lawyer Martin Lipton was the first to use the poison pill; Clifford Chance positioned itself as the first “international law firm” with its transatlantic merger with Rogers & Well; Howry Simon was the first law firm to take out a full page ad in the Wall Street Journal. Many possible other “firsts” exist for lawyers today. Whether in a certain defined, niche area of law, or perhaps in the application of a novel legal concept, or maybe for a lawyer’s work for a particular, specialized industry, positioning a lawyer or firm as a “first” can be incredibly valuable. The

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challenge is discovering, cultivating and carefully marketing those “firsts” in an artful and intelligent way.

Define Your Audience

Before Belvedere launched its product, it engaged in a process it called “discovery marketing,” during which it sought to identify and indoctrinate an army of so-called “brand apostles” to become comfortable with and champion their new product. They wanted the trend-setters and pop culture influencers from a variety of different, narrowly defined industries—in film, music, fashion, journalism, business and politics—to all feel special and “in the know” about their new product, in the hope that a Reagan-like trickle-down effect would take place, sending the message to the masses that Belvedere was the hottest new thing. It worked.

Over 1,000 VIPs received beautifully packaged bottles with personal notes from the CEO, introducing the spirit and touting its revolutionary positioning. People like Ralph Lauren, Steven Spielberg and Bill Clinton were recipients. Responses were overwhelmingly positive. A foundation of credibility for the brand was laid, greatly helping establish the product’s visibility and drive its sales early on.

The lesson here for lawyers is two fold: identify your audiences as narrowly as possible and provide them with something that they can immediately benefit from and impart to you or your firm.

Attorneys need to identify who, precisely, they are trying to reach with marketing initiatives. Is it CEOs or GCs of specific companies or perhaps leaders of identifiable trade organizations in narrow industry verticals? Identifying who to target requires careful analysis and consideration of a firm’s client base, where legal problems exist, and the firm’s ability to serve that defined audience’s legal needs with excellence.

While Belvedere could reach out and provide its audiences with vodka, lawyers can offer something far more valuable: solutions to on-the-job problems that keep clients up at night. This means developing compelling information that your audience will value. To do this, specialization and focus are key. Identify industry-specific problems, illustrating your understanding of your audiences’ environment and offer information addressing those problems, creating a bond between you and a prospective client. For example, securities litigators might contact broker-dealers with specific ways to combat increasing fraud claims by customers, or labor and employment attorneys might offer fast food franchisors a way

to deal with pervasive discrimination claims. As with Belvedere, the more lawyers can narrowly identify who their targets are and their precise needs and proclivities, the more valuable their marketing initiatives will be.

Consistent Messaging

Underlying all of Belvedere’s endeavors was its ability to consistently convey its message and its value. Across all the marketing tactics it employed—in its PR and advertising campaigns, and its direct marketing programs and trade marketing initiatives—“luxury and differentiation” were its key messages. All employees involved in Belvedere’s sales and marketing were trained to articulate and highlight the brands characteristics. Whenever anyone spoke of the brand—whether in the trade, or to the media, or directly to consumers—Belvedere was described consistently in the same manner. This built, by design, a clear level of understanding in the market of what Belvedere was and what its competitors were not.

These effective communications principles certainly carry over to attorneys and the firms they serve. Lawyers seeking to cast themselves apart from their competition must be able to effectively and consistently communicate their value and points of differentiation. When speaking to reporters, during pitches, at industry conferences, or even in the elevator, a lawyer—and every member of a firm—should be able to clearly articulate what they do, their value and why they are different and better than their competitors.

Conclusion

At first glance, many of the marketing tactics and strategies used to promote a consumer product like Belvedere seem inappropriate to promote attorneys. However, on closer inspection, many of those tactics and strategies are truly applicable and valuable. If attorneys or firms can learn to identify themselves as a “first mover” in a defined category, identify a specific audience to which to communicate and deliver something of value, and communicate their uniqueness to that market in a consistent and compelling way, they will be well on their way to crafting a marketing cocktail with just right ingredients. Cheers!

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