

Building a brand-new brand

A proper firm rebranding starts with the fundamentals

BY DANIELLE LEE

Marketing professionals are fond of telling clients to look to the logo and beyond when it comes to branding. But for many CPA firms, the economic downturn had managing partners' eyes trained on only one line — and it wasn't underlining a focus-group-tested font.

Now that the financial landscape is improving, firms are re-considering their brand, and what the word means. For most firms, it represents a core identity.

"It's important that a firm develop a brand that is truly who they are," acknowledged Jean Marie Caragher, president of Chesapeake, Va.-based Capstone Marketing. "Not something they wish they were or strive to be."

Uncovering an intrinsic personality, however, will usually require some outside help and extensive research.

Katie Tolin, as marketing director of Ohio CPA and business advisory firm Rea & Associates, is currently in the middle of this process. The firm's "many stages of research" kicked off last fall — and started with the basics. "We even looked at, 'Is our name right?'" she revealed.

While the local consulting firm that Rea & Associates brought in for the research phase helped them realize that it indeed was, the accounting profession benefits from being hard-wired to

look at fundamental aspects like this on a micro level. "I work with detail-oriented people," Tolin explained. "Any change recommended needs to be based on some serious statistics."

Especially when these changes come so infrequently. Rea & Associates has not gone through such an extensive overhaul since its founding in 1938. In her experience, Caragher has noticed that rebranding often coincides with firm anniversaries. Two firms recently chose their 85th and 90th years as occasions for change.

Anca S. Munteanu, director of marketing for East Coast accounting, tax and consulting firm Citrin Cooperman, might have had a similar wait on her hands if not for the specificity of her proposal.

She had realized that there was a disconnect between the brand and the culture that had outgrown

Rebranding

FROM PAGE 1

its original 1979 visuals, and brought it to a partner's attention. "An accounting person has the mentality that this has worked for 30 years, so why [rebrand] now?" Munteanu said. "I went through the exercises to show him why, showed him the competitors and other successful brands in the marketplace."

It wasn't the first time Munteanu broached the subject. But it was the first time since her original push was postponed last year due to the economy.

Now the firm was willing to spend money on the due diligence phase. For most firms, this includes researching the competition, surveying employees and clients, and setting up focus groups. Then areas of overlap between what employees consider the firm brand and what clients and potential clients look for in one are more closely examined.

Throughout the process, the other firms brought up as a selling point to get the rebranding ball rolling are kept in the periphery. "We didn't want to look and sound like our competition or any other accounting firm," Munteanu elaborated. "We wanted to differentiate ourselves and reflect who we really are."

Tolin echoed that: "There are a lot of similarities in CPA firms. That doesn't mean the way you position and brand yourself in the marketplace has to be like everyone else."

ON THE SAME PAGE

When firms do find a way to stand out, they should do so in a uniform fashion, say experts. "We go through and do the whole rebranding, ensuring the brand message is consistent and there is consistency between locations," said Tolin. "One office should feel the same as walking into another office."

It was during the due diligence phase that Tolin and her colleagues discovered that this would be a little more difficult than matching wall colors.

In collecting survey feedback, Rea & Associates found that one client, located in the corner of Ohio, wanted a more high-touch relationship — a trusted advisor that was more like an extension of their team.

"We are trying to come up with those themes that will encompass all the marketplaces," Tolin explained. "When you are that geographically diverse, how do you come up with that one message that will resonate with all the groups?"

It must be one that is first understood and disseminated internally.

During the employee survey portion of the firm's research, "Most of the 200 employees had same perception of who they are," Tol-

in said. "But there were a handful of people outside of everyone else and you would look at [their survey responses] and wow, some people have a different perception of who we are."

Citrin Cooperman developed mission and value statements to get every employee on the same page, and kept that verbiage in staff sightlines by attaching it to office items. Success mandates are also framed and displayed on every desk.

When the logo was launched, it also gained popularity in the office in adorning men's cuff links and women's charm bracelets.

Rea & Associates has not reached the logo discussion yet, though Tolin said that her gut instinct tells her the firm will opt for change.

'We didn't want to look and sound like our competition.'

THE TAG IS 'IT'

Usually, a new logo will be a jumping-off point for firms that are rebranding. Taglines can connect the cultural change that firms are striving for with the visual.

The words will encapsulate firm philosophies, while the "science of color," as Caragher described it, attempts to evoke the necessary emotions in customers.

But taglines must speak truthfully. "It's more than creating the new logo and having a new color," Caragher stated. "When rebranding, it's important to follow up with evidence of that positioning."

Caragher worked with Gainesville, Ga.-based firm Bates Carter on their tagline, "Exceeding expectations. Always." This year, the firm is conducting client satisfaction surveys to ensure that it is living up to its claim.

"The branding process is fun and a real rallying point for firms' marketing programs," Caragher added. "But launching it is just the beginning; you have to demonstrate how you are living that brand."

Another client, Georgia accounting and consulting firm BowenPhillips, chose "Innovative Thinking. Solid Advice" as its rallying cry. The firm must now display to customers how it continues to evolve its mindset, Caragher said.

One way for all firms to communicate and back up these claims is through talking points,

she added. Employees should be given "the tools to be educated about what the brand means to them, the firm and the big picture of the goals the firm has set."

A snappy new tagline, then, is meant to set an internal culture and agenda for serving clients.

SPREAD THE WORD

For one firm, BDCo of St. Helena, Calif., the use of wordplay did not end there.

Geni Whitehouse, an instructor who handles the communications for training and consulting company MentorPlus, also wears the hat of "Countess of Communication" for BDCo. In this part-time role she works closely with managing partner Dave Brotemarkle and partner Craig Underhill, also known as the "Cheer Leader" and the "Emperor of Enlightenment," respectively.

This title rebranding evolved from another word that's a fundamental part of MentorPlus's unique methodology: why.

Developed by Edi Osborne, who has coached accounting firms since 1990 and formed MentorPlus in 1996 with Steve Osborne, the focus on "why," signals a shift from firms talking about what they do to why they do it. And that, in turn, catalyzes the change from a service to a client-centric culture.

With the help of Osborne, Whitehouse relayed both messages to BDCo, which had already redesigned its Web site with the tagline "Putting people first" — with "people" including both clients and employees, who are meant to be empowered by clients.

"We had this deep belief that customers have more information than we do," Whitehouse said. "We are not there to be experts, but to facilitate and help people be accountable for the things they want to do — we come as really good listeners."

Bolstering its tagline with this new perspective trickled down to everything from better client matches to décor. BDCo "got rid of the hierarchal structure" by placing everyone, including the partners, in open cubicles.

And when it came time to convey the firm's message beyond the three words headlining its Web site, Whitehouse convinced Underhill to begin blogging — by tempting him with one of his hobbies, photography.

"Trying to get an accountant to blog is not an easy undertaking," Whitehouse confessed. "You have to build a blog about something you're passionate about or I'm not going to get you to do it."

Passion is key for the whole of any rebranding effort. Without it, design changes are just that. "If you look at something and you could take my logo off and put someone else's on it, would it sound the same?" Tolin asked. "If you haven't differentiated yourself, it might be a good exercise to go through' AT