

## Differentiation: The Whole Product

Featured in the December 2019 edition of the [Edge International Communiqué](#)

By Mike White



Either in the course of my “client experience innovation” work, or in helping groups of partners do a better job finding new clients, I hear the following frustration, “We’re a great law firm! However, as great as we are, we’re no different from other great lawyers at other great law firms who do what we do. Frankly, I find this reality to be really discouraging . . .”.

I largely agree with this lament . . . but only as far as it goes. No doubt it is challenging for a firm and its partners to differentiate themselves in a market at a purely technical level (i.e., based on good lawyering alone); however, corporate consumers of legal work are not just buying “good lawyering” per se – they are often buying much, much more. It is in relation to the “more” that law firms can in fact differentiate themselves.

Commercial legal-services consumers (corporations, in-house lawyers at corporations, business managers who engage outside law firms directly) buy a “whole product” rather than just raw lawyering. For example, they buy a non-technical sensibility that when curveballs emerge during the course of a legal matter, the lawyer-client decisioning about the surprise will be really effective. Or, for example, they often buy benchmarking information you provide about how other clients might assess certain risks and be guided by those insights. They are buying a lot of things outside of “lawyering” that make up the whole product.

An emerging procurement feature in what law firm clients are buying relates to cross-disciplinary integration. Companies want to see all of their providers (lawyer, strategy consultant, business insurance risk consultant, capital markets adviser/investment banker, CPA, etc.) link their insights with other providers outside of their discipline in ways that make sense. For example, litigation lawyers should have a seat at the table when the risk-management consultant quarterbackes the corporate risk-assessment process. Transactional lawyers should play a role in the post-acquisition business-integration process being managed by outside management consultants. Learn who are the other non-law firm advisers to your clients and try to partner with them in this way with “hybrid” insights and solutions.

Certain client types really appreciate the role a law firm can play outside of “lawyering” in helping them do what they do as a business. For example, private equity funds are most challenged by their low-quality (and quantity) deal flow; today they have a hard time finding well priced companies in their focused sector in which to invest. Any law firm that can directly – or indirectly (through the law firm’s clients and other relationships) – enhance a private equity fund’s deal flow will transcend the noise and position itself to be retained.

Law firm clients give law firms credit for being “better” just by being “different”; despite this, law firms do a really bad job of differentiating themselves. Law firms that do try to differentiate do so at a purely technical level (“ . . . No. Honest! We’re really, really, really, really . . . technically smarter and better than your existing law firm you’ve used blissfully for the past 25 years . . .”). Clients aren’t generally in the business of generating legal work; rather, they have “jobs to be done” that throw off “legal symptoms.” Learn about all of a prospect’s “jobs to be done” that *drag “legal symptoms” along with them*, and try to make those jobs easier.

Finally, ask your lawyers the following: Are you a better lawyer by virtue of your being part of our firm than you otherwise would be at a peer firm? If the answer is yes, create an inventory of all of the reasons why such is the case. In so doing, you’ll begin to build an inventory of firm differentiation that your lawyers can use during their outreach with prospects and others in the market.

So, don’t be constrained by the limits imposed by conventional differentiation. Learn about your prospects’ “jobs to be done,” and sell your “whole product”!

***Edge Principal Mike White, an expert in the field of law-firm growth, works with firms and practice groups in two primary areas: client experience innovation & differentiation, and strategic planning for growth. He also advises firms on business-development skills training/planning/coaching, law-firm succession planning, lateral-partner integration, and partner-compensation restructuring.***