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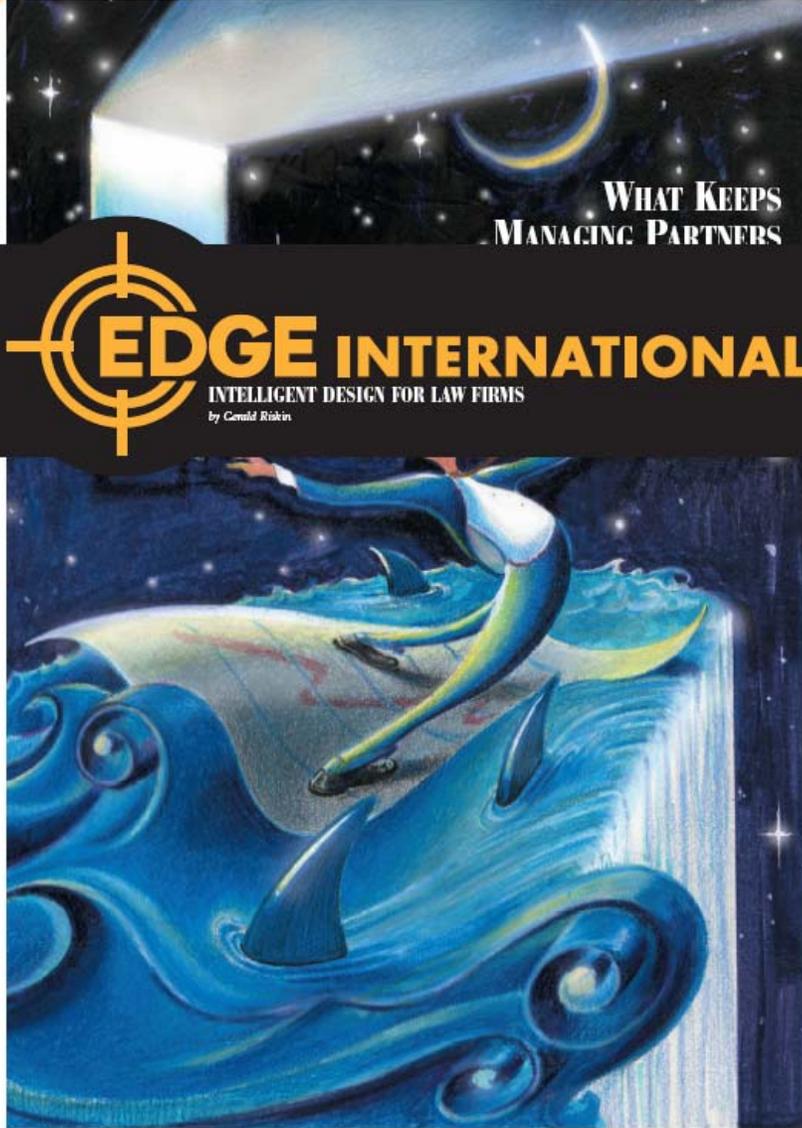
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INTELLIGENT DESIGN FOR LAW FIRMS
by Gerald Rishin

**MANAGING A
LAW FIRM'S
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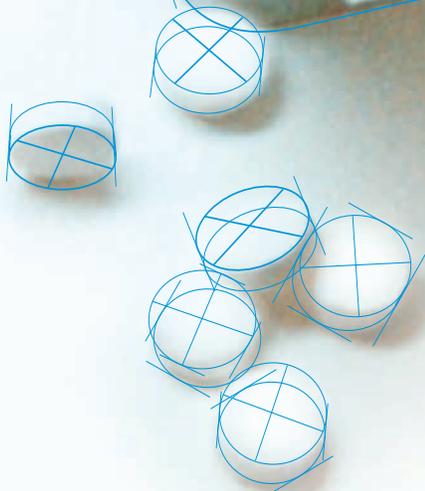
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FOR LAW FIRMS

In a recent issue of *Fast Company*, an article entitled “The Interpreter” starts out like this:

Claudia Kotchka is holding the secret to understanding design at Procter & Gamble in her palm. It's not a P&G product, but a tin of Altoids®, the “curiously strong” mints produced by Wrigley. As the scent of peppermint oil wafts out of the box, she points out the nostalgic typeface, the satisfyingly crinkly liner paper. “Even the little mints look handmade,” she says. “It’s not completely full. The whole thing is very authentic.”

Then comes the twist. “Let’s say P&G buys this brand. What are we going to do?” asks Kotchka, P&G’s vice-president for design innovation and strategy. “[Employees] always gave me the same answers. ‘We’re gonna cost-save on this tin. We’re gonna get rid of this stupid paper — it’s serving no functional purpose.’”

She plops the tin on the table and picks up another product, unable to suppress a mischievous smile. “And I go, ‘Okay! Exactly! And this is what you get.’”

Kotchka reveals “Proctoids®,” a box made of cheap white plastic from P&G’s baby-wipe containers. With uniform beige ovals jammed into the container, fewer colors on the lid, and no paper, Proctoids® taste like Altoids®, but they look as appealing as a pile of horse pills.

Gone is the pleasure people get when they buy Altoids®. Gone, too, is the up to 400% premium they pay. “That’s what design is,” she says of the look and feel. “That’s what designers do.”

What Claudia says Procter & Gamble would do to Altoids® is exactly what most law firms do. Good lawyers believe that high-quality work should speak for itself and therefore be in high demand. But in the real world, people are attracted to the “crinkly liner paper” — the “experience.”

In our fragmented profession, it’s time for some law firms to stand out from the pack by creating an attractive experience that goes along with the high-quality work. You’ve heard of practice management — but do we discuss “Practice Design”? Not yet.

The *Interpreter*, thanks to Jordan Furlong, Editor CBA National for editing and publishing this article in a recent issue.

If law firms truly want to capture the attention of the marketplace, to stand out for all the right reasons, they need to start thinking more about how they present themselves to the market and how they deliver their services. By committing time and resources to law practice design, innovative firms would open up whole new frontiers of competitive advantage over their rivals.

Most people would laugh off the idea — it's too new, too unusual, "unbusinesslike." But a few will think about it, and they will do something that creates a real competitive edge. Here are seven areas a Design Manager could address and tasks he or she could perform to ensure that practice design is integrated throughout the law firm, sending a clear, consistent message to the marketplace.

1. YOUR LAWYERS

Altoids® are still manufactured today in Bridgend, Wales, where they originally were produced during the reign of King George III (1760-1820 AD). Compare Altoids® for a moment with contemporary London-based global law firm Denton Wilde Sapte, which first opened its doors in 1785.

The original recipe for Altoids® candy has remained unchanged since the eighteenth century, and every unit is identical to every other unit. The same obviously cannot be said for the lawyers of Denton Wilde Sapte, who have evolved and turned over with the profession and have always differed from one another quite dramatically.

No firm can make lawyers identical in appearance and experience, and no firm would want to — lawyers' unique characteristics and talents are the lifeblood of a firm. What we can do is adhere to certain standards and values — a consistent firm philosophy and a consistent approach to client relations, file management and client communications. Are all lawyers reading from the same playbook?

2. YOUR APPEARANCE

How your lawyers dress and comport themselves sends a clear message, whether you intend it or not. Books like John T. Molloy's *New Dress for Success* and *New Women's Dress for Success* explain what those messages are and how they will significantly affect clients' perceptions of your firm. Your lawyers' attire, like the tin and the crinkly paper, is a statement. What do you want it to be?

"Dressing down" means easing formality requirements, not aban-

doning standards. If you like to dress "casual" — that's fine! You should dress casual. But have your tailor smarten you up casually. If a lawyer dresses like something the cat dragged in (even if motivated by a desire to be countercultural), his or her ability to convey intelligence and caring to a client will be impaired.

3. YOUR BEHAVIOR

Altoids® advertise their product as "curiously strong mints" — in the law firm equation, you are the mint! The client experiences you. Accordingly, client interactions with you and your colleagues will be strongly influenced by the degree to which you all consistently possess and display client relations skills. The challenge here is that unlike Altoids®, you can't simply tweak a manufacturing process and improve every single mint, identical to all others.

But a certain degree of consistency is attainable in the law firm environment. So, perhaps all employees must attend client-relations skills training, and must conduct themselves consistently and productively when listening, managing expectations, handling complaints, soliciting feedback, visiting clients, etc. You might not pay much attention to these aspects of the client relationship. Rest assured, your clients do.

4. YOUR HALLWAYS

Many years ago, my 100 year old law firm moved from the premises it had occupied for 65 years (I am not exaggerating) into an "A-list" office tower. It was an incredible brass-and-glass environment — quite impressive, thanks to an accomplished designer. The reception desk was made from marble imported from Italy and almost resembled the Pearly Gates. But then there was the stain.

Innocently, some of the glue from the rug installation seeped up through the rug — which itself was the best money could buy, so it would outlast the human race. Months and months went by, but the management committee could not be persuaded that this stain was a high enough priority to be dealt with. And that single stain more than offset all the other environmental investment until it was removed.

The Practice Design Manager would inspect the premises with two sets of eyes. First, how would a client see the premises — does the physical appearance convey the right message of high quality, organization, meticulousness and the right kind of suc-

cess? And secondly, how do members of the law firm see the premises — is it an environment that makes concentrating on the task at hand a little easier, or is there chaos that distracts?

5. YOUR WALLS

I have visited many law firm offices in many countries, and in all those firms, the art on the walls is simultaneously funny and sad. You see, you're not really allowed to comment on the art, because you're not allowed to like or dislike it. You might see an exquisite piece of art in a boardroom and say "Wow!" — impulse overcomes judgment and you compliment it.

Unfortunately for you, the people at the firm hate it. They're tired of it. That's right — if the Mona Lisa were in a law firm, the incumbents would despise it by now. And it works the other way, too — no matter how ghastly you think a piece of art is, you can't be critical because you never know which spouse of which power partner chose it. The point is that too often, art in law firms is political, not practical. That message gets through — to employees and clients both.

Your choice of art discloses to your clients whether you and your colleagues are adventurous, courageous, colorful, boring, or staid. Accordingly, your Practice Design Manager might hire a professional to choose art that will deliver an objective and intentional impact, or rent rotating art from a local art gallery, changing the art periodically and keeping those pieces that do stand the test of time.

6. YOUR WORK PRODUCT

I have watched some of the best lawyers in practice hand a Bic pen to a client to sign a significant agreement. Why? Because they don't realize that the pen makes a significant statement. If you choose the cheapest things you can find for important matters, what kind of message do you think your client takes from that?

If you place your client's copy of a key agreement in a suitable, high-quality folder with the firm's letterhead, what does that convey to the client? What if you add a tasteful high-quality cover? Is the effect improved again? If you simply hammer the pages together with a single staple and hand it over to the client as is, you may not be harming yourself — but you are not helping yourself either.

It's as important to dress the work product as it is to dress the lawyer. The message you send through the appearance of your

work product is up to you. A Practice Design Manager could ensure that the firm does not neglect this issue.

7. Your Communications

Letterhead has been important to law firms for centuries. The better firms would traditionally emboss it onto high-quality paper with engraved fonts, suitable for correspondence with valued clients. The more adventurous firms risked using color. The message sent by letterhead hasn't changed in all these years — but the wide array of communications vehicles have.

In today's electronic world, lawyers have numerous points of branded contact with their clients: mail, fax, e-mail, Website, etc. Today, e-mails can be upgraded with graphics, with automatically updating links leading to important information. Pleasing fonts and colors can make messages easier to read. A Practice Design Manager would marry function and design for all firm communications.

Perhaps the most important job of the Practice Design Manager would be to ensure consistency throughout the firm. Whether you are a friend or a foe of branding, all legal work product and communications should have a similar look and feel, regardless of the source within the firm from which they come. Lawyers aren't Altoids®, but they can resemble each other in the ways that count.

As my friend Larry Anderson writes in his One Sentence Blog, "Commitment does not require the absence of doubt; often commitment means acting despite your doubt." Applying this to law firm design, it means that while not everyone has to agree, everyone does have to commit. The Practice Design Manager would obtain that commitment — and enforce it.



Gerry Riskin is a former Managing Partner with a truly global consulting practice. Gerry is the author of the highly acclaimed book, *The Successful Lawyer*, and co-author of *Practice Development: Creating the Marketing Mindset*; *Herding Cats*; and *Beyond Knowing*. He has served on the Conference Board of Canada, is a Visiting Fellow of The College of Law in London and a Visiting Professor to the Gordon Institute of Business Science at the University of Pretoria in South Africa.