

# BECOME A BRAND, NOT A COMMODITY

## How to Stand Out in an Increasingly Competitive Legal Marketplace

**For centuries, attorneys have enjoyed a prominent role in society.** Recognized for their intelligence, discernment, and education, attorneys commanded respect - and were able to enjoy a high standard of living in recognition of their contribution to a healthy and just society.

Today, the legal profession is changing rapidly. High levels of competition combined with rapid changes in technology have created unprecedented market conditions. Not only are there more practicing attorneys in the United States than ever before, but the emergence of “DIY” legal services such as LegalZoom and RocketLawyer have created extremely low-cost (or even free) legal solutions for many consumers.

In addition, services such as Avvo Advisor make it possible for consumers to instantly connect with a lawyer on the phone and pay as little as \$39 for a 15-minute conversation. Think Uber - but instead of a car and driver, the app connects consumers with a lawyer.

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*This is what you're up against.*

And if that wasn't enough, there's another major shift on the horizon - the emergence of artificial intelligence as a threat not only to low-skill jobs, but also to highly-educated professionals such as accountants, doctors, and yes, even lawyers. (If you'd like some reading to keep you up at night, Harvard Business Review recently published an article entitled [Technology Will Replace Many Doctors, Lawyers, and Other Professionals](#), which is obviously speculative - but still worth paying attention to.)

These changes have been years or even decades in the making, and the pace of change is only increasing. Combine these forces with the skyrocketing cost of law school, staggering amounts of student loan debt, and the oversupply of lawyers in many markets, and there's plenty of cause for alarm.

Now here's the thing: most of these forces are beyond your control. There's not much you can do to stop change from arriving. What you can control is your response. And believe it or not, there's an opportunity presenting itself in the midst of this rapid evolution.

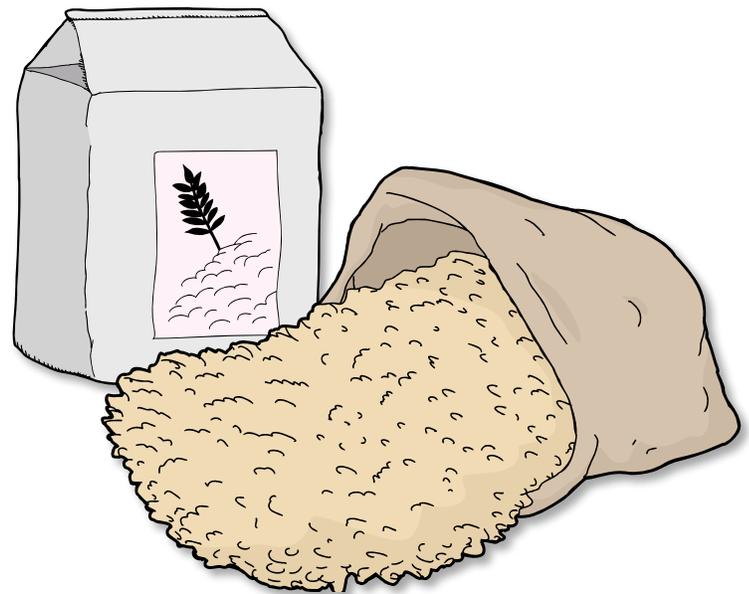
Most lawyers react to these market forces by panicking, lowering their rates, chasing any potential client with a pulse, and essentially **becoming commodities**.

That's the opposite of what you should be doing - namely, **building a brand for yourself as an expert in your practice area and finding ways to create value for your clients above and beyond what they'll find elsewhere**. If you allow yourself to become a commodity, you're at the mercy of market forces - and as we discussed above, that's not a safe place to be right now. Instead, your goal should be to build a brand for yourself that sets you apart from the other lawyers and legal providers that are crowding the market.

This requires a different mindset, and the first step is to accept the reality that a significant percentage of potential clients out there, perhaps even the majority, are always going to choose the cheapest solution - DIY online solutions if possible, and if forced to hire a "real" attorney, the absolute cheapest guy in town.

### **Don't chase those clients.**

It's a race you can't win. There will always be someone willing to work for less. And if you attempt to play this game, you'll end up over-worked and miserable because you're not making enough money to enjoy a comfortable lifestyle, let alone hire the staff you need to create a thriving and sustainable practice around.



**Commodity**, noun - *a good or service whose widespread availability typically leads to smaller profit margins and diminishes the importance of factors other than price.* (Merriam-Webster.)

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**When you establish your brand as a leading expert, when you find a way to provide unique value to your clientele, price becomes much less important because you're not a replaceable commodity anymore.**

Instead, commit to building a brand and a reputation that positions you as the “go-to” guy or gal in your market. When you establish your brand as a leading expert, when you find a way to provide unique value to your clientele, price becomes much less important because you're not a replaceable commodity anymore. You'll earn more referrals and clients will begin to seek you out, rather than the other way around.

Think about it this way: if someone in your family developed a rare medical condition, who would you hire to treat them - a run-of-the-mill generalist, or a well-regarded, award-winning specialist in that specific condition? Obviously, you'd choose the specialist, and you'd be willing to do just about whatever it took to make sure that your loved one was able to see that specific individual.

In summary, here's what we've established thus far:

- ▶ The legal profession is undergoing rapid change. Increased competition, the emergence of online providers and apps, and even the threat of artificial intelligence are creating uncertainty and making it harder for many lawyers to earn a good living.
- ▶ Many lawyers are panicking, lowering their rates, and chasing any potential client with a pulse - allowing themselves to become commodities at the mercy of unfriendly market forces.
- ▶ To thrive in this changing marketplace, do the opposite - focus on providing exceptional value to your clients and build a brand which positions you as an expert in your area of practice.

In short: develop a uniquely valuable brand for yourself. Don't become a commodity.

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**Now let's talk about how to make that happen.** First we'll start with some basic strategies that every lawyer should consider, and then we'll dive deeper.



**You cannot and will not be perceived as an "expert" if your focus is too broad.**

## Tip #1 - Narrow Your Focus

Focusing in on a single practice area, or at least a group of related practice areas, is an important first step in creating a powerful brand identity. You cannot and will not be perceived as an "expert" if your focus is too broad. You've heard the phrase "*jack-of-all-trades, master of none*" - it's very relevant here. Your market needs to know what you're exceptional at, and that's why your focus should narrow.

I know how resistant most lawyers are to narrow their practice areas, often for economic reasons. But keep this in mind: *You can start by simply narrowing the focus of your marketing - you don't have to turn down clients in other practice areas.* We all have bills to pay and you may not be ready to turn down paying clients yet. So you can continue to take work in other areas, even as you focus your marketing on a specific niche.

With time, as you focus your marketing and build a brand as a leader in your area of practice, you'll attract more of the work you're focused on, you'll be able to charge higher rates to do it, and you'll build a much more sustainable and efficient practice because you won't have to re-invent the wheel every time you get a new client.

This strategy will make a huge difference when it comes to generating referrals, because focusing on a single practice area **makes it easy for your network to remember what you do** and recognize opportunities to send you work. Not to mention that people are much more likely to refer a lawyer who is an expert in a particular area of need.

So if there's nothing else you take away from this report, I hope you grasp the importance of narrowing your focus and becoming a sought-after expert in your area of practice. It's the most important step you can take to differentiate yourself in a market that is reducing lawyers to interchangeable commodities.

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## Tip #2 - Create a Website That Reflects Your Status

For many potential clients and referral sources, your website will create the first impression of your law firm. And for many more, it will play an important “confirming” role in shaping perception - because when you meet someone in person, often the very next step they take if they’re thinking about hiring you (or referring work to you) is to look you up on the internet. Obviously, you don’t need to be told how important it is to present yourself well *in person* - to dress sharply, to groom yourself well, etc. That’s a given.

But it’s *just as important to present yourself well online* - and many lawyers don’t seem to understand *this*. Your website should be professionally designed and reasonably up-to-date with current design trends and functionality. It should be well-organized and laid out in such a way that your visitors can easily understand what you do. It should be mobile-friendly - in many cases, the *majority* of your website traffic will be individuals using a mobile device rather than a desktop computer. It should feature photos and other media that make you look good - that present you as the expert that you are. It should include website content that builds your credibility while also speaking directly to your target market in their language. And it should feature resources that demonstrate your expertise in your niche - articles, blog entries, a video library, etc. It’s not enough to *say* that you’re really good at what you do - create content and resources that demonstrate it.

In the “real world” your brand is shaped in large part by your physical appearance, by the way that you communicate, by the appearance of and service provided by your staff, and by the way your office is decorated. On the internet, your brand is shaped in large part by your website. It’s a critical area of focus and it deserves your attention.



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## Tip #3 - Become Visible on Social Media

Social media is the perfect tool for building your online brand. In addition to your website, it's the other area of your internet presence that's going to most shape your perception in the marketplace. You might be surprised to learn how many potential clients and/or referral sources look you up on LinkedIn, check out your Facebook page, or follow you on Twitter. So first and foremost, it's important that your social media presence is congruent with the brand you're building in person and with your website.



**Give your followers a reason to pay attention and they'll stay engaged... meanwhile, you're educating them, pre-selling them, establishing your expertise, and creating top-of-mind awareness.**

In addition, social media is an ideal channel for communicating with your network while demonstrating your expertise and credibility at the same time. The first step is to create profiles on the major social networks - we recommend that every firm have a presence on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Google+.

Once you're set-up, it's important to post content consistently. You can't build any sort of engaged following if you disappear for weeks at a time. We highly recommend that you post daily, or at the very least every other day. The other point I want to emphasize here is that your content should be value-based. You can't simply post promotional content over and over and expect your audience to stay engaged. Instead, mix it up and post content that your audience will care about. Blog entries that provide practical advice for your target market. News articles that matter to your clients and potential clients. Quotes that inspire your audience — or simply make them laugh. Give your followers a reason to pay attention and they'll stay engaged... meanwhile, you're educating them, pre-selling them, establishing your expertise, and creating top-of-mind awareness.

Every lawyer who is serious about building a strong brand should go through these first three steps. Now, we'll cover two advanced strategies that will build on this foundation and take your brand to the next level. This is far from an exhaustive list, but these are ideas intended to help you get the ball rolling.



## Advanced Strategy #1 - Launch a Podcast

Podcasting has exploded as a media source - iTunes reports over one billion subscriptions, and hundreds of millions of plays per month. Launching a podcast geared towards your target market is an effective strategy that you can use to educate potential clients, keep them engaged, and build your credibility at the same time.

The key is to come up with a theme and a direction that provides genuinely valuable information to your market. As a business attorney, you could focus your podcast on legal pitfalls that entrepreneurs should be aware of. A family attorney could focus on preparing for and navigating the divorce process, including how to protect and care for the children involved. The possibilities are endless. What are the most common questions and misunderstandings that your clients have? Chances are, addressing those issues would make a great podcast.

Keep in mind: even if you never build a huge podcast audience, the simple fact that your podcast *\*exists\** creates a significant credibility boost. Obviously, it's great if you have a lot of listeners. But even if you don't, make sure that your podcast is a visible part of your marketing - promote it on your website, on social media, and in your email newsletter. If you'd like some more guidance on where to begin with your podcast, feel free to shoot me an email - [daniel@spotlightbranding.com](mailto:daniel@spotlightbranding.com).

## Advanced Strategy #2 - Write a Book

There's arguably no greater tool to establish your credibility and your expertise in your area of practice than publishing a book. Being able to add the label of "author" to your bio is a huge leap forward!

While writing and publishing a book may sound overwhelming, chances are that you have a good amount of content that you have created over the years which could be re-purposed into a book. If you have a marketing person on your team, assign them to organize this content into an outline. Then, create new content as needed to fill holes and create cohesion. There are a variety of companies out there that can help you lay out and publish your book, and some of them can even help you with the content as well.



**Being able to add the label of "author" to your bio is a huge leap forward!**

Once you've had your book printed, the marketing opportunities are endless. Give it away at consultations. Offer it as a gift to past clients. Use it as a door prize at events. It's a powerful tool that will enhance your credibility and build your brand as an authority in your practice area in a very big way.

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## In Conclusion

Unprecedented change is sweeping through the legal profession. Between the growing oversupply of lawyers in the marketplace, the emergence of dirt-cheap online providers, and the growing popularity of third-party "find-a-lawyer" apps, you're all-but-certain to feel a pinch.

The good news is that you don't have to accept it. In a world where lawyers are increasingly commoditized, you have the opportunity to swim against the tide and differentiate yourself in a powerful way.

Hopefully this report provided you with some clarity and some practical action-steps you can take immediately. If you'd like to know more, or if you'd like to talk to our team to learn how we can help you with this process, we'd love to chat with you.

[Simply click here to request a free consultation!](#)



## About the Author

Daniel Decker is a Founding Partner of Spotlight Branding, which provides web design and internet marketing services for lawyers and law firms. Follow him on Twitter [@DanielJDecker](#) and reach him by email at [daniel@spotlightbranding.com](mailto:daniel@spotlightbranding.com).

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