

What IKEA Tells Us About the Business Model of Law Practice

By Victoria Vuletich

My cousin is a master woodworker. His custom-made furniture and cabinets have been featured on HGTV, and he has made a good living for the last 20 years through his craft. A few weeks ago, I asked him how the recession has affected his business and was surprised at the emotional tone of his response. Usually an optimistic, light-hearted person, he ruefully replied that his work is no longer fun. He said it is all about price point now, with customers negotiating him down to the lowest possible price. He relayed how he hired someone to turn cabinets with a special machine, and what they accomplished together in three hours with the machine would normally take him three days to do. He earnestly stated, “We need rich people. Rich people hire us and make the economy go.”

This conversation struck me, as I had just been to IKEA for the first time (yes, I know, I was living under a rock) and was amazed at what I saw—everyone, including me, delighting in inexpensive and mass-produced home furnishings. The conversation also struck me because it echoed the laments of many seasoned attorneys I have talked with who are losing clients and business

and, some for the first time, seriously struggling financially.

One thing we know for certain is that wealthy people and large businesses with lots of money to spend are a finite and limited group. There are not enough of them to support all the attorneys and master woodworkers competing in the marketplace. So if you are a master lawyer or woodworker and no longer have wealthy clients to support your way of doing business, what do you do?

This is where IKEA can be instructional. The naked truth is that IKEA sells cheap, attractive home furnishings. Your IKEA furniture is going to look very similar to my IKEA furniture. So why do people go crazy over buying cheap furnishings that will look like everyone else’s cheap furnishings? The answer is that IKEA gives something more than the product. Going to IKEA is an experience. You don’t just walk into the store and look around—you are guided, like a journey, through the different areas. You can make a day of it—enjoying a meal and leaving your children in the play area so you can concentrate on the ubiquitous pieces you wish to purchase. Items are arranged and displayed in a variety of ways; you can sit in a room composed entirely of IKEA fur-

nishings and visualize how they might look in your own home.

Now, I sense what you may be thinking—furnishings are a product, but the practice of law is a service profession. Aren’t we comparing apples and oranges? Well, not really. If you are a client who needs to have a will drafted, you have lots of options. You can buy a form online or choose one of the 20 different attorneys on Main Street who handle estate planning. How are you going to choose which one to hire before deciding you may just want to do it yourself?

In the IKEA age, it’s about giving clients something more than just a decent product. It’s about giving them something extra to distinguish attorneys offering ubiquitous services from one another. Attorneys will have to offer something in addition to their normal services that will make people want to retain them and not another attorney or prevent prospective clients from downloading forms online.

Our new and future clients are products of the video age. They expect branding and image and are thrown off by people and institutions that do not pay attention to these dynamics, even while remaining skeptical about the promises contained in marketing and branding. As attorneys, our marketing

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and price point are key to our ability to thrive in this IKEA-ized environment.

The good news is that every attorney possesses something unique that can serve as the source of this extra something. My personal attorney is a recently graduated former student of mine who operates a virtual firm. What attracts me to her is her warm, outgoing, supportive nature. I feel safe talking with her about my hopes and dreams, knowing she will be tender with me while still bringing her razor-sharp intellect to the issues, keeping me grounded in reality. Her website and promotional materi-

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als reflect this warmth and support in a professional yet cutting-edge format. You can sense the forwardness and vitality of her practice through her promotional materials.

How will you offer something extra to your potential clients? Perhaps the answer lies in your philosophical approach. Are you a family law attorney who does custody work? The answer could be as simple as creating an inviting office for your clients—maybe a playroom for the children while Mom or Dad meets with the lawyer; a room with a TV, DVDs, and books for older kids; cookies, snacks, and beverages for everyone; or maybe an office pet that doesn't trigger allergies, all in a space with appealing, comfortable furniture. Done right, everyone will *want* to be in your office.

Maybe this is too touchy-feely for you. What are your interests? Are you a sports buff? If you like team sports, are athletic, and admire those with athletic skills, hire an experienced marketing person to help you create a tasteful theme targeting peo-

ple who share your interests. Sponsor a local 5K walk/run or maybe a youth softball team. The point is to create an opportunity to connect with potential clients on a personal, visceral level.

Honing in on the services we plan to offer, coupled with precisely targeting those niche groups in our marketing efforts, is key in the emerging IKEA-ized market. And marketing is not an area where you want to “do it yourself.” We may be legal experts, but marketing folks are experts, too. Don't discount the value of their expertise.

Getting people in the door is just the first step. While we may enjoy going to IKEA, we don't really want our home to look like everyone else's. If a client or customer is attracted by something extra, great. But those who can make a ubiquitous product look and feel like something custom made once the client walks in the door will have the keys to the kingdom. Smart interior designers are finding unique ways to incorporate IKEA products into a customer's home, keeping the price down for the customer but softening the ubiquitousness of the product.

But we can't forget the other part of what makes IKEA work—the price point. Our clients will always be price sensitive,

and seasoned lawyers are competing with new graduates who have figured out how to deliver legal services efficiently and inexpensively—like my personal lawyer who has no brick-and-mortar office. The emerging marketplace will be brutal on attorneys who are inefficient with time and money. They simply will not survive. If clients can choose between 20 attorneys offering ubiquitous services, they will choose the one who can deliver the product inexpensively and efficiently, especially if something extra comes with the package.

Times have changed and our legal marketplace is IKEA-izing, but that doesn't mean we can't make these principles work in our favor. Get busy figuring out what your extra something is, then go out and market it. Make something ubiquitous unique!

And you will thrive. ■



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