



## Know what's for sale

By Evan Scott

There are only four things for sale in the world. Who cares and why write about it? There are at least four reasons.

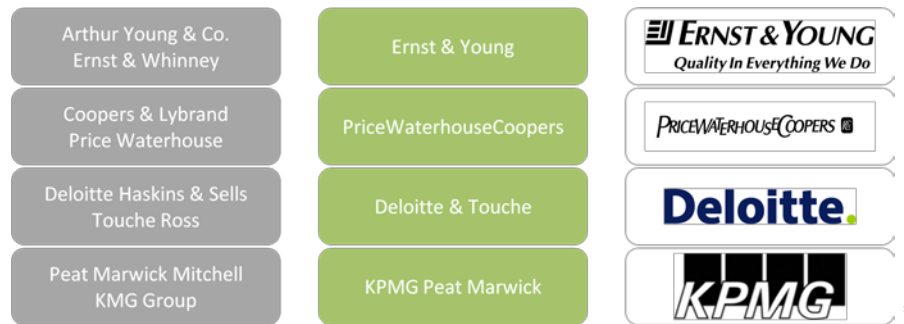
- 1) In the world of sales and marketing, it's important to know what, exactly, you're selling (laugh, go ahead, but there are companies and professionals who don't know).
- 2) In brand building, not all things for sale can be packaged like a bar of soap.
- 3) Half the battle of marketing, branding, group persuasion, mass influencing – whatever – is understanding the environment in which sales occur.
- 4) "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler." – Albert Einstein.

My hope for this article is that it will

- 1) Challenge some existing ideas – especially if you are a B2B or professional services marketer. I want this to challenge some conventional thinking about what it means to drive sales in paradigms other than consumer packaged goods.
- 2) "Move some cheese" – if you are or are working with a marketing and advertising agency, I hope this sparks challenging conversations about the work you're doing across various B2B and other markets.
- 3) Lead to a better understanding, planning and execution of branding and marketing initiatives for your organization.

### Some Framework

In 1987 Peat Marwick merged with KMG to form KPMG. Two years later Ernst & Whinney and Arthur Young & Co. merged. Eight years after that, Coopers & Lybrand and Price Waterhouse merged. Within 6 months, in the Fall of 1998, each of these firms, with Arthur Andersen following close behind, launched unprecedented brand advertising campaigns – international in scope and worth millions of dollars. The campaigns lasted throughout the Dotcom Boom, into 2001.



*\*more detail can be found on Wikipedia at "Big Four Auditors"*



### The new world of B2B branding?

I was disturbed by the campaigns because they were clever and creative, sometimes even oddball-ish with, for instance, silhouette-style drawings from E&Y. The branding and marketing campaigns didn't seem right.

Over the next two years, I conducted an independent study of professional firms, beginning with research into the formation of professional firms, their business and sales models and, of course, their marketing

communications.

As it turns out, professional firms – law, accounting, architecture, and so forth, were rare until the late 19th century (the first law firm I found was in 1801 – an agreement between a trade attorney and a tax attorney). When firms really started taking off, they were not so much companies as they were agreements between attorneys – sort of a consortium of entrepreneurs with a tentative amount of trust between them to share business. That may explain why so many firms used to have six, seven, sometimes eight named partners in their corporate name.

The most interesting fact in all of this research was the sales model. No one ever does business with the firm. They do business with the professional. To this day, aside from Fortune 500 auditing, which carry the Sarbanes-Oxley requirements, all firms' new business is driven by their partners – called "rainmakers" – and the vast majority of the business is signed by local partners.

This got me thinking. I knew what was wrong with the brand advertising I had been seeing. Firms were hiring traditional marketing and advertising agencies who were applying traditional branding principles to their work. They determined that one of Ernst & Young's brand differentiators was 'insight' so they conducted a campaign focused on insight; working to make sure that E&Y owned the word insight. Fair enough, except that all firms already own that moniker – just like they all own 'relationships', 'honesty', 'diligence', and a half a dozen other core principles required to be a successful professional firm.

We ended up conducting a two-year study of more than 450 professional firms across five segments – law, accounting, IT, engineering & architecture, and risk management. Here's what we found on messaging.

Key phrase	Occurrence among researched firms' collateral
Built our reputation on trust	100%
Committed to the highest standards of excellence	96%
We have unique relationships with our clients	96%
We go beyond the ordinary/not typical/give something extra	95%
We value client relationships/client-focused/exceeding expectations of clients	100%
We have a unique work environment of camaraderie/built on mutual respect/trust/our teams work together to serve clients	100%

Branding a professional firm, then, cannot be successful without including the product – the people who deliver the services. Professional services are the only business model where the sales person is also the product. Nothing else works that way – which meant their successful marketing had to be based in a completely different paradigm than consumer packaged goods. This realization was the first step towards building what became *Attraction-based Marketing™* and our understanding of three distinct branding paradigms. More on those in a minute.

**Vindication at last!**

In 2004, Dr. Nirmalya Kumar gave voice to much of what we had built by way of marketing paradigms for B2B companies. In his book, *Marketing as Strategy*, he devotes a section to Lou Gerstner and his remarkable turnaround of IBM through the mid to late 90s. All of a sudden, instead of selling IBM, they were selling the people of IBM – a multi-million dollar, integrated campaign featuring IBM professional services and the smart people who actually deliver those solutions.

This, following a half-a-dozen implementations of our new model, solidified for me the effectiveness, and therefore the accuracy, of our model. Dr. Kumar is awesome. Seriously. Google him and Amazon his book.

And so we move forward.

**Only four things?**

So, there are only four things for sale in the world. Generally speaking, they can be grouped into three categories: 1) Products & Services, 2) Professional Services, and 3) Causes or ideas. Below is a chart that illustrates these categories.

Products	Services	Professional Services	Causes/Ideas
<b>Consumer / Retail</b>		Law firms, accounting firms, IT consulting, higher education, engineering / architecture	Religion, political campaigns, non-profit groups, economic development / cities & regions
Coca-Cola, Honda, Gillette (P&G), Dell, Kodak	FedexKinkos, Roto-Rooter, JiffyLube, Hyatt Hotels		
<b>Business-to-business</b>			
Cardinal Health, Lockheed Martin, Teradata, SAS Institute	USBank, Hyatt Hotels, AT&T, Teradata		

Some companies sell in more than one category. Banks, hotels, and other industries are the easiest ones to identify, serving both direct-to-consumer (DTC) and business-to-business (B2B) customers. Beyond that, there are many companies that cross over from B2B products to professional services as well – one of the most famous cases being IBM, noted above.

These distinctions become very important when beginning the process of branding and market planning – each category operates on a different paradigm.

**More trouble with consumer branding principles**

Having established Attraction-based Marketing™ as a distinct marketing paradigm for professional services, I ran into new challenges with clients in the non-profit space – namely economic development organizations working to position their region for outside investment.

Another nine month study of cities, regions, and states’ efforts to market themselves revealed another segment of marketing dominated by consumer packaged goods (CPG) brand development and marketing practices.

What we discovered this time was that places weren’t products. That’s simple enough to understand but so many regions were focusing on their brand logo and tagline as central to what makes their area unique. An outrageous example of this comes from Deloitte. They mapped the number of areas or regions that adopted the word “silicon” or “IT” in order to tout their focus on that industry. Here’s the map:



I think my favorite ones are Silicon Holler and Silicon Swamp. No, wait...what about Silicon Gulch? They serve shots of whiskey in test tubes. Or Silicon Snowbank...you betcha.

This is just one example of how much of what is sometimes called “place branding” goes wrong in the hands of CPG marketers. They’re asking the wrong questions because they don’t understand what’s for sale.

From this study, we developed Identity-based Branding©, which details branding and marketing principles for ideas and causes. Interestingly, we discovered that our homes are more an idea than a product or service. We relate to our homes in much the same way we relate to our religions or the causes to which we donate – these choices and commitments are a function of who we are, not where we are or what we like.

People are not from Texas, they’re Texans. They don’t practice Catholicism, they’re Catholic – and we describe ourselves this way for many of the ideas to which we identify – Republican, Democrat, Community Activist, and so on.

**A new way to see the world of brand development**

So, here they are. Because there are fundamental differences in how these categories of “things for sale” are bought and paid for... it stands to reason there are also fundamental differences for how to brand and market them.

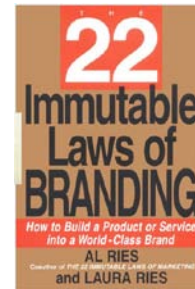
To meet the marketing needs of the different categories, there are three different branding paradigms.

Products	Services	Professional Services	Causes/Ideas
<b>Branding and marketing strategies</b>			
Based on the notion of repeatable or universal experience. Original principles developed by Procter & Gamble		Based on the notion of knowledge base and wisdom of professionals	Human element includes spirituality of the buyer

## Products & Services

While there are variations of products and services – consumer, B2B, SaaS, HaaS, and so on – selling products and services are based in a unified paradigm. Standard theories based on the 4Ps (Product, Promotion, Price, and Place) are being updated to include concepts such as customer value and solution selling.

Much of what is taught in business or design schools is relevant to this methodology – brands are created across all touch points but that deliver on the “brand promise”; the one thing that differentiates the product or service in the marketplace. A great book on these principles is [“The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding”](#) by Al & Laura Ries.



Some of the most important differences in this category exist between consumer and B2B branding and marketing.

Consumer branding is the original area of practice – the sexy stuff of Madison Avenue and Hollywood. Gum that’s so fresh you fly through the air over the North Pole; cars that are so mesmerizing your body and heart beat take on the rhythm of the car’s engine; and so on. There’s a bit of mutually-agreed-upon lying that happens between advertisers and consumers.

B2B products and services branding has the particular challenge of being both engaging and maintaining a level of ‘straightforward-ness’. Much of that requirement has to do with who is buying and how they buy – from competitive RFP processes to the roles buyers play (purchasing, accounting, HR, marketing, etc.). These types of consumers won’t go for the level of whimsy and impulsiveness, for instance, to which product consumers will often respond.

While it is critical to uphold the general principles of the 4Ps and deliver on a product’s unique brand promise, B2B marketing and branding should also embrace relationship selling. B2B sales efforts must demonstrate their commitment to their prospects’ performance and bottom line.

## Professional Services

Professional Services are a unique sales model. Law and accounting firms, engineering & architecture, higher education, IT and software consulting...these are the only businesses where the sales person is often the product. No other type of business works this way and it informs a great deal of how branding and marketing have to work in order to be successful.

Intuitively we know that if a sales model is different, the marketing and branding paradigm ought to fit the sales model. One of the key differences is that the professionals delivering the services must be included as an integral part of the brand.

Successful firms embrace networking, community or civic engagement, and establishing their professionals as industry experts. This is as it should be when we realize that people don't hire law firms, they hire lawyers. The natural extension of this reality is to also embrace the inclusion of the individual professionals in the marketing and advertising of the firm – to leverage their top performers and experts as an integral part of the firm delivering on its brand promise.

Indeed, accounting firms don't compete over better or worse tax codes – they compete over the individual creativity and wisdom of their professionals.

Key aspects of a professional services brand are the faces, accomplishments and stories of the experts themselves.

### Cause & Ideas

The world of causes and ideas is, by far, the weirdest area in which to do branding and marketing work. This is what I call the messy world of human interaction. This is the world of prophets and cults, campaigns and policy, belief systems and personalities. It's messy.

Nothing in this space is ever sold – things are bought. Let me say that again – and give credit where credit is due. I first heard this idea from Gordon Hochhalter, principal with Mobium Creative Group. He was referencing the changing world of B2B marketing and how web technology has enabled customers to gain control of the buying process. People buy ideas and causes based on their own spiritual, social and political choices. Again, ideas and causes are not sold, they are bought. This is a bigger deal than it may sound since the onus for the exchange of money or services rests with the buyer.

**Yes**



You're not fully clean until  
you're *Zestfully Clean!*

**Not so much**

**Deloitte.**

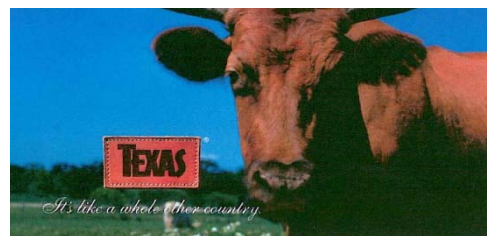
You're not fully balanced  
unless you're *Deloittefully  
balanced!*

So, what are the key principles that differentiate this model from the other two?

***A cause's brand cannot be created, it must be excavated.***

The brand already exists in the hearts and minds of its constituency. No cause has universal appeal – so don't try to brand it for the masses. Brand it for the believers. You may get converts but you can't fake an identity – you can't be all things to all people.

The Texas brand – what it means to be a Texan – was grown and has existed for a hundred years before any agency got a hold of it to develop campaigns for tourism. So the process of developing the brand is not about making decisions about what we want it to be but, rather, discovering what it already is and telling that story well. Texas' brand is so strong it transcends any demo- or psychographic profile, from West Texas farmers to metropolitan CEOs. Their brand defines their assets as well, such as sports team – the Cowboys, Mavericks, Longhorns, and Aggies all speak to the “cowboy way”.



***It's who we are, not what we like***

Being Catholic, supporting a Republican candidate, and volunteering for the Red Cross are all a function of who we are rather than what we like or want. More than any other kind of brand, a cause's brand not only lives in the minds of the faithful, the brand is defined by its audiences – how they engage and what they expect from their experience. Think about that. Could Texas officials ever decide to remake the Texas brand because they wanted to attract a different kind of person?

***Authenticity is paramount***

Now, everyone will talk about being authentic – even traditional consumer product brands – so let's define what we mean by authentic. Authenticity in idea or cause branding – what we've termed Identity-based Branding™ - is all about resonance and spirituality. I know, I know – we just dove off the cliff into crazy theory land.

**First** of all, I mean small 's', spirituality – the idea that the brand aligns with your moral or ethical compass, whatever that may be. For instance, in the world of fund-raising, planned gifts always align with the donors' passions. The donor considers issues of legacy and life work and contributes accordingly. Major gift officers know this. You don't often find an Ohio State University graduate donating a major gift to the University of Michigan. *(full disclosure – as a lifelong fan of THE Ohio State University Buckeyes, I encourage Michigan alums to contribute to their*

*athletic program...we enjoy beating Michigan soundly and it would be a shame if Michigan could no longer afford to suit up and get a good Buckeye whoopin’).*

**Secondly**, it must resonate with their life experience – people with a family member who has suffered through breast cancer will be much more likely to support an organization that serves breast cancer survivors.

### **Knowing What’s for Sale Saves Lives**

I’m thinking of the scene in the movie, *A Few Good Men*, when Jack Nicholson’s character, Col. Nathan R. Jessup, justifies everything he does through the lens of “saving lives.” Knowing what’s for sale and developing a brand strategy based on that knowledge does, indeed, save lives – it saves the lives of the brands you’re trying to protect and grow by equipping them with the appropriate stories and pictures that will connect with your key audiences.

It’s a war out there for mind share and engagement, regardless of what you’re selling – don’t send your brand into the fray ill-equipped, mismanaged, and unprepared for the battles they will face.

-----

*Evan Scott is founder and CEO of Terrain Strategic Integrated Marketing, a new kind of marketing firm committed to helping companies move from “having a marketing department” to “being a marketing organization.” TerrainSIM delivers a full suite of consulting and marketing services across three practice areas: strategic & business planning; marketing & communications planning; and creative services & program implementation. For more information or to contact TerrainSIM, please visit [www.terrainsim.com](http://www.terrainsim.com).*