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# 21st Century Branding

**Synopsis:** *Advisors are finally being pushed to market themselves effectively. But first they need to create something called a "brand."*

**Takeaways:** *Start by defining your target client, and then define who you are and what you offer. Enlist your best clients in the process by asking them how they describe you. Then build an image around logo, target phrases, colors and office layout.*

The emerging financial planning profession might be the only business category in history to have gained significant market share without paying any noticeable attention to marketing. While your Wall Street competition buys Super Bowl ads and Robos saturate Google with click ads, readers of this publication have grown through the sophisticated marketing process of waiting for the phone to ring. To the extent that advisors brand themselves, the distinctions tend to be negative. *We are not brokers. We don't sell products. Our firm didn't participate in causing the last global meltdown. We don't actively bet our own money against the investments we recommend to you.*

One might suspect that this happy condition won't last forever. In fact, it may not last another 12 months, due to a variety of forces that are coming together in the marketplace.

What's different today? Marion Asnes of The Idea Refinery ([www.IdeaRefineryllc.com](http://www.IdeaRefineryllc.com)) points to today's business landscape of robo-competition, where venture-funded competitors are questioning your value and offering asset

## EARLY WARNING

• SEC Chairwoman Mary Jo White has now publicly suggested that advisors should buy their own examinations in the private sector, while the SEC would repurpose its inspectors as supervisors of third-party compliance exams. The first organization to seek approval would be FINRA, as a back door opportunity to regulate advisors. But it's likely that the policy, if adopted, would also attract accounting and legal firms.

This, of course, would open up a new lobbying front for the profession. It should be noted that FINRA, charged with examining the broker-

dealer world, doesn't ever visit advisor offices; only broker-dealer home offices, so it's not impossible to rebut its claims to be more diligent than the SEC. And it will be pointed out that the SEC has received funding increases of 8.5% a year for the past 20 years from Congress, and has not used any of that money to raise the frequency of advisor examinations. (Or, at least, the frequency has gone down during that period.) One alternative: the SEC would cede to the states advisory firms with less than \$1 billion under management.

management services at commodity prices. Beyond that, the 21st century environment features more media platforms interacting with clients and prospects than ever before, which means more competition for the client's attention, understanding and dollars.

And finally, Asnes says that the pervasiveness of design in the new-media world is imbuing the marketing world with greater visual sophistication. "We're all bombarded

posing some very basic questions to a number of marketing experts in the financial planning space. What, exactly, IS a brand? How do you create one? Is it your logo, or the colors on your website? Is it the name of the firm?

"I think a lot of people mistake your brand for just your logo," says Amy Zimmerman of AZ Communications in San Diego, CA ([www.azcommunications.net](http://www.azcommunications.net)), "but it's much, much more than that. A

how you position your business or yourself in a specific market, in order to communicate the value you're bringing to that market. There are personality, character and emotional elements to it."

How does this differ from positioning? Marie Swift, of Impact Communications in Kansas City, KS (<http://www.impactcommunications.org/>) says that positioning tends to be a process of analyzing market segments, and then aligning services, messages and strategies for a specific market—AKA the ideal client. Branding, to Swift, is fundamentally about quick perceptions. "Branding is the way you create a personification of the firm," she adds. "It is the company personality that hints at the value proposition and makes the right people want to learn more."

Steve Wershing, of The Client Driven Practice in Rochester, NY ([www.theclientdrivenpractice.com](http://www.theclientdrivenpractice.com)), invites you to think of the brand concept as the underlying logic behind all your communications about your firm. "Brand is the first thing you want to figure out when you're going to market yourself and your firm," he says. "Once you have your brand figured out, there are all kinds of ways that we can communicate it: through your website, through your client newsletters, your email newsletters, through special offers that you make, and special events. All of those things should be informed by your brand."

"I know a lot of marketing professionals think of the brand as the corporate identity, the logo and the typefaces and all that kind of stuff," he adds. "But to me, the brand is an expression of the experience, a reflection of what you do for people."

***As an individual, your identity is your personality,  
what you wear, things that you do.  
Branding is essentially the same thing  
for a business.***

by visual messages on television, the Internet and signage," she points out. "It's not just about your elevator speech or brochure any more."

For the first time in the profession's history, advisors will have to respond to the competition by communicating the full extent of your planning and advice value. But how? What will that look like? Where do we start?

Any professional advertising/marketing organization will tell you that before you start developing an advertising/marketing/messaging campaign, you need to create something else first.

You have to create a brand.

### *Branding defined*

For most of us, "branding" is a pretty nebulous concept. So I started my investigation into branding by

good brand leaves an impression on you, and creates an emotional connection. It packages value, packages professionalism, and that promise of what that brand will do for you."

"I tend to think of branding as a business's personal identity," adds Kristin Luke, of the consulting firm Kaleido in San Diego, CA ([www.kaleido.net](http://www.kaleido.net)). "As an individual, your identity is your personality, what you wear, things that you do. Branding is essentially the same thing for a business."

Kim Vollbrecht, at V2 Strategies in Cincinnati ([http://v2strategies.com/about\\_v2.html](http://v2strategies.com/about_v2.html)) offers a broader definition. "In the service space, branding is pulling together the pieces that help a company better connect with the people they most want to serve in the marketplace," she says. "It is about

What's the experience like, and what are the outcomes that you generate for people? If I want to try to get people talking about an advisor, then the brand is what I want them to talk about. The brand is the stuff that an advisor wants to create for people to pass on to other folks."

Wershing says that "brand" really boils down to a fundamental question. "When somebody comes to you," he says, "and they've just interviewed three or four other advisors, and they say to you, *I know I need an advisor, I think you would be competent and our chemistry is fine. I have just talked with three or four other people who also appear competent, and they also have good references, and I am comfortable with any of them. But my question is: why should I choose you over these other advisors?*"

"The brand," Wershing says, "answers that question."

### *Brand examples*

Okay, but can you give us some examples of an excellent brand, and what makes them excellent?

**Inside Information** is published monthly by Robert N. Veres.

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Luke offers the Nike brand as her favorite. "The *Just do it* slogan and the swoosh logo evoke this feeling of energy and excitement, of wanting to be active and doing things," she says. More generally, she believes that the strongest brands can be narrowed down to one word that you feel when you think about them. "In the auto industry, 'jeep' is about adventure,"

safer than most other cars."

Another company offers a cautionary tale. "Cadillac used to have the prestige brand," Wershing continues. "But then General Motors decided that they wanted to be more efficient about manufacturing, and they made all of the cars across all of the GM lines the same, basically, except with different marks on them.

***If I want to try to get people talking about an advisor, then the brand is what I want them to talk about. The brand is what the advisor creates for people to pass on to others.***

she says. "Volvo' is about safety. And they do everything, from their messaging to their logo, from their colors to their advertising to make you feel that way."

Asnes points to the late Steve Jobs. "His identity was maverick genius, rule-breaker, rebel," she says. "The branding was: Think Different."

Wershing says that the Mercedes Benz organization has been especially successful in establishing a recognized brand in the auto industry. "Their one word is: 'prestige,'" he says. "If you want to be perceived as having prestige, you drive a Benz, because that's what it is." Then he turns to the Volvo brand. "They've taken great pains to market themselves as the safest cars," says Wershing. "But if you look at the crash test results, Volvos are no safer than any other car. They've built a brand around safety, and they've done it exceedingly well, because they've been able to capture that brain space without actually being materially

There was little or no distinction between the Chevy model and the Cadillac model built on the same chassis, except for the Cadillac logo and a couple of little interior appointments—and the prestige went away."

The lesson: if you don't recognize what your brand is, and take pains to protect it, then you can lose it.

Can we find any really strong brands in the financial services space? Wershing sees a few firms that seem to be starting the process of building a viable brand. "Financial advisors have one of two things to market," he says. "Either they market a solution or they market an experience."

An example in the 'solution' space, he says, is White Lighthouse Investment Management, based in Lausanne, Switzerland and Lexington, MA. "Their market is expatriate American executives, where they offer a deep technical knowledge of all of the cross-

jurisdictional tax and estate issues,” says Wershing. “A firm in Atlanta called SignatureFD specializes in corporate executives,” he adds. “When I helped them create an advisory board, we brought some of their corporate executive clients together, and we were asking: so what’s valuable and really special

and doesn’t have a degree of clarity and emotional connection, it won’t stand out—even if you decide to buy Super Bowl ads. “Advisors don’t realize that when they don’t take the time to work on their brand, they ARE branding themselves, but in an inappropriate way,” she says.

And she adds that this branding

you intend to be in relationship with that niche, with a strong mission statement and vision statement.”

Step two is to create a “brand voice” to express that essence. There are many possibilities. Your voice could be playful, irreverent, authoritative, academic, make use of jargon or colloquial terms, or hinge on key words or phrases.

Once you have your essence and voice defined, you proceed to step three and start to create the “brand elements”—a coordinated package of things like signage and office decor, attire in the office, printed and digital materials and their colors, fonts, layouts, images, illustrations and themes. Other elements include a strong logo, tagline and even mascots and spokespeople. Spokespeople? Swift points to Skip Schweiss as a prominent spokesperson for TD Ameritrade Institutional, and to Harold Evensky’s association with MoneyGuidePro.

“The brand elements provide a “shortcut” to understanding what the firm is all about, and can pull the listener/viewer into a position of curiosity or interest,” Swift explains.

Let’s take these steps one at a time.

#### *Defining your target market*

“A good brand,” says Zimmerman, “knows exactly who its target audience is, and it speaks directly to that target audience.”

But as you define your clients, Vollbrecht warns that you can’t just create your niche based on where the money is. “I ask people: *who are your best clients?*” she says “*Who are the ones where you just seem to click and*

***A strong brand not only helps you attract clients; it can also help you attract staff and talent. People want to be part of something bigger than themselves.***

about Signature? One of the guys said: I went through two or three accounting firms, and exhausted their technical expertise in stock options. I have all of these awards, and they’ve all got different expirations, and they’ve all got different strike prices, and they’ve all got different terms on them. I brought them to SignatureFD and said: *what do I do with all this?* Their answer was: *‘no problem.’*”

Another way to create a brand is through the client experience. “One of the best examples of it is Kile Lewis and Ted Jenkin in Atlanta, at oXYGen Financial,” says Wershing. “Their target market is Gen X clients. There is no difference in the planning that they do, really. But they provide a very different experience. They have a Wii in the lobby, and an oxygen bar, and they put funny videos of themselves on their website.”

Does all this mean that if you don’t consciously create one, then you don’t have a brand? Asnes says that you do, indeed have one, but because it wasn’t created consciously,

exercise is not simply important for attracting clients or creating a foundation for your marketing and messaging campaign. “A strong brand also helps to attract staff, and talent, to you,” she says. “People want to be a part of something bigger than themselves, something that is making a difference in the world. In this market where talent is in high demand, you need to have a more compelling story than: if you need a job, I’m hiring.”

#### *Brand creation*

So how, exactly, do you go about creating a brand? Swift describes a 3-step process. First identify “brand essence,” which is broadly defined as what you stand for and who you serve. “You have to start with your target market, what is otherwise called a niche,” says Swift. “A niche is who you’re serving, where you’re intentionally going after that body of like-minded people,” she adds. “Then define how

*jell, and you most enjoy working with?* They are clearly finding something that is particularly beneficial about you, that builds loyalty. Is there a demographic like age, income range or occupation, or something about hobbies and interests or family? Do they tend to be more conservative or more liberal? What is their religious and/or ethnic makeup?"

The shortcut is to select several of your current clients and use your imagination to define what they have in common. Vollbrecht says that often this will uncover more than one target client. "There might be some people who are close to retirement, but you also enjoy working with business owners," she says. Some advisors appeal to clients who want safety in their portfolios, while others might prefer someone more aggressive.

If you can narrow your client base down to this level of detail, then it helps you not only target the right clients, but also reduces the chances that you'll have a lot of the 'wrong' clients knocking on your door. "You're effectively pre-screening, in a way, so that your target audience can identify themselves as a good fit or not an ideal client for you," says Zimmerman.

As we'll see later, the clarity also helps you understand how your brand should be expressed. Marketing to millennials will involve more social media outreach than marketing to pre-retirees, and the website and logo will probably look different for advisors who want to appeal to these different age cohorts. Doctors and Silicon Valley professionals might see the world somewhat differently, and respond to different brands.

### *Creative niche examples*

What does a niche look like? Wershing offers the example of Carol Ann Wilson, the advisor in Longmont, CO whose website promotes her as 'the nation's leading expert on divorce.' "Her website has all kinds of

younger advisor get the credibility to tell prospects who have accumulated their portfolio over the past 25-30 years that he's the right person to manage their money?

"His dad's plan was for the son to get the enrolled agent degree and bring people in for taxes, and

***Narrowing down your target market helps you not only target the right clients, but also reduces the chances that you'll have a lot of the "wrong" clients knocking on your door.***

technical information about equitable distribution and getting a fair shake when you're getting divorced and that kind of stuff," says Wershing, "but you will also find articles on her site like: what to expect when you get to court, and how to keep in touch with your kids if you're the non-custodial parent. Those are not financial topics," he says. "But they ARE topics that her target market cares about desperately."

Marketing to doctors, dentists, corporate executives, divorcees and millennials is pretty straightforward. Wershing offers a couple of examples where an advisor carved out a more creative niche.

"One of my favorite guys that I'm working with now is in lower New York state," he says. "His dad is very successful, and has been in the business 30 years, and now his dad is expecting the son to build a client base."

This, of course, raises the age-old question: how does a younger advisor bring in clients who meet the firm's minimums? Where does the

then convert them into wealth management clients," says Wershing. "But there are a variety of problems with that approach, including the fact that most wealthier people go to a CPA to get their taxes done."

What to do? "We started with: what's your passion?" says Wershing "What have been the more significant experiences in your life? It turned out to be: he became a Division I pitcher for the Clemson University baseball team, doing it the hard way, which is: going to community college, and then walking on at the school."

How does that define a niche? "This advisor decided to develop a specialty of working with families of high school athletes to help them maximize the college experience," Wershing explains. "Most of these kids are not going to play professional ball, but they DO have a goal of playing ball at a high level as part of their college experience. He explains that if we do this right, it will not only make for fun playing ball while you're in college, but you can use that athletic ability to get into a better

school, or to negotiate a better deal so that college will be more affordable for you.”

Part of the process is advising the family about the coaching that the high school athletes will need in order to prepare themselves for the next level. Another part is helping the students and parents leverage the students’ athletic accomplishments to help position them for the best possible college experience. “That’s his opening to talk with clients about the rest of their finances,” says Wershing.

Meanwhile, the young advisor helps the family produce a highlight video that they can send to coaches, and helps in the recruiting process.

act is going to fall flat on its face. He found that he was using those same skills in client engagements around couples. He was reading their body language and hearing the things that weren’t being said out loud.”

Actually, the target audience is narrower than just ‘couples.’ “If you find that you argue with your spouse about money, or talking about money is uncomfortable because the two of you tend to look at it in very different ways—those are the people that make up his niche,” says Wershing. “He works on the couples dynamic first, and then, once they have a platform for appreciating where the other one is coming from, they work on the financial advice.”

Vollbrecht agrees. “Your brand has to be based on, why are you doing what you do?” she says. “What do you like most about it? There has to be a vision about what you do for your clients and what you bring to the world. What are you trying to accomplish? Why is the world and your customers better off?”

“I think that every brand needs a story, why you are in business,” adds Zimmerman. “Your story is your best illustration of what you promise to do for your clients, and how you’re going to do it. One of the first questions that I ask,” she continues, “is: Why are you in business? What is your unique value proposition? Tell me the story of why you’re in business and what you do and how you do it. The telling of the ‘why’ is very important, because it makes your service meaningful to your community.”

Defining yourself to this level of detail clearly requires a certain amount of self-exploration, which many advisors clearly have not taken the time to do. “I’ve seen a lot of mission and vision statements that are pretty generic,” says Vollbrecht. “They say things like: ‘integrity’ and ‘trust’ and a lot of other well-meaning words that don’t connote choice. If it’s a really clear mission and vision, and there is something unique about how or why you do what you do that is different from other people in your industry, or that is unique and sets you apart, then it can lead to the right type of branding.”

Of course, everybody will have a different positioning statement, value proposition and story. But the general format is: We do this particular thing for this particular

***Your brand has to be based on: why are you doing what you do? What do you like most about it? There has to be a vision about what you do for your clients and what you bring to the world.***

“If he can successfully get the coach interested in the student,” says Wershing, “then the coach will be working with the financial aid people to get the student a better deal.”

The point here is that you don’t have to stick with traditional definitions of a niche or target market.

Wershing offers another creative possibility, again playing to the strengths of the practitioner.

“An advisor in Atlanta works with couples to help them become more effective as a team on their finances,” he says. “This advisor’s hobby is improv, where you have to develop a sense of your audience and get feedback from them, or else your

*Defining your purpose—  
and who you are*

Focusing on one or more niches—your client community—is step one toward building the “essence” of your brand. But your “essence” should also be an outgrowth of who you are, creating a necessary precondition to effective branding that Asnes calls ‘authenticity.’ “If the branding is a gloss laid on top, with no foundation in your identity and your community and your aspirations,” Asnes warns, “then it will not be as effective, because it will not be authentic.”

group of people in order for them to have this outcome. The story should define your passion around providing these services, and explain where it came from.

Swift suggests that you get some outside perspective as you define yourself in the marketplace. “Companies can sit in a room and conjure up their brand identity based on their mission, vision and values,” she says. “But the reality is that clients and the marketplace may perceive the firm’s brand differently.”

She recommends that you ask your clients and strategic partners what they say about your firm in conversation with friends and colleagues, and listen carefully for clues and insights. “When they think about your firm, what is the first thing that comes to mind?” she asks. “Is there a gap between your intentions and their perceptions?”

Next steps? Asnes talks about the Three ‘L’s: Leadership, Language and Look. “You need to think about these things consistently, and express your brand identity in those areas,” she says.

### *Leadership: Consciously living your brand*

Chances are, you’re behaving authentically and true to who you are. But before you go out and create logos and websites and marketing campaigns around your brand, take a moment to ask yourself: is your staff living and communicating that vision?

“You should train your staff on how they should communicate your brand,” says Wershing. “Whenever you open your mouth in public, it

ought to be an expression of your brand. Everybody who comes in contact with anybody in your organization,” he adds, “if they talk with somebody who works for you, in 30 seconds they ought to have some idea of what your difference is.”

*If prospects talk with somebody who works for you, in 30 seconds they ought to have some idea of what your difference is.*

“Ideally, there is alignment among your people, so they’re all in agreement about fundamentally what they’re doing, for whom and why, and how do they benefit,” adds Vollbrecht. “If they’re clear on that, then they’re living the brand. If not, then you have strategic problems at the firm. Your branding is never going to be clear.”

How does that look in the real world? Consider your target client. Do you, and the other advisors at your firm, talk about the outcomes, or about more generic topics? “A niche client may not be thinking about fee-only advisors vs. commission-based,” says Vollbrecht. “They’re thinking about: *what is the legacy that I’m going to have within my family? What am I going to do with these stock options? How do I get through this divorce?*”

Swift adds that advisors frequently miscommunicate their brands because, in their eagerness to share the ‘how,’ they leave out the more important ‘why.’ “We met with one advisor recently, and went over

how he talks with prospects,” she says, “and we quickly realized that he goes too deeply into the detail of what they do. He was going deeply into his expertise, but people couldn’t hear the value because it was too far out of their normal reality or their nomenclature.”

Her solution: have him back up and, in written and verbal communications, talk about the benefits rather than the details of the solution.

“This illustrates a very important point for most financial advisors,” adds Asnes. “Many of them are so eager to say what is distinctive about them that they go very quickly into very technical language. It’s kind of like me going to Best Buy and wanting a TV. I don’t want to hear about the electronic issues between your color balance and stuff like that. I don’t understand it, and even more, I don’t care. What I want is a television that looks good, and sounds good, and is energy-efficient and is internet-ready. Getting advisors to that place is very important,” she adds. “That has been an important and difficult struggle for almost everyone in this industry.”

But these are all preliminary exercises in getting to the brand. How do you create the brand itself?

“The brand is defined and communicated around visual

and textual elements that you disseminate,” says Swift. “A particular style of photography can implicitly communicate who or what you are, and reinforce a message. It draws up a feeling or sense of something. It can be an icon, illustration or logo that communicates you in some nonverbal way. It is the colors that you use. The verbal can be audio-visual and print and in-person wording that you use to communicate who you are and what you do and how you help people and why that’s important. That’s how the brand begins to solidify: in the outbound communications to the rest of the world.”

A shorthand way of saying

difference. And that’s the brand.”

But where do you find those words? Echoing Swift’s earlier comment, Vollbrecht thinks you should start with what your core referral clients are saying about you that has successfully brought in referral prospects. “What do they say to their friends and co-workers?” she asks. “They’re saying: *Gee, you really have to work with this person and these people, because...*”

She breaks this down into three elements. “There is problem-solving, so if someone has a situation that needs to be made better, you’re the right person to do it,” she says. “There is the basic service provision, goals they want to reach and you’re

aspirations, you’re bringing that emotional element to bear and you’re building a different type of connection.”

Vollbrecht thinks that your ideal brand communication, in the verbal realm, is not phrases or market positions, but trigger words that evoke your distinction in the marketplace. Nike has: “Just do it.” Yours won’t be quite so elegant, and there will be more words, something like: *consistent growth, asset preservation, your dream vacation, building a legacy.*

Why trigger words rather than explanations? “In this day and age, most people do not read documents,” Vollbrecht explains. “They scan them. They’re looking for trigger words or trigger images that draw them in to read the copy in that part of the text.”

*The look: Communicate your brand message implicitly or nonverbally*

***Your brand is the way you communicate your positioning in the marketplace. It encompasses the logo, colors, font, images and the wording you use.***

this is that the brand is the way you communicate your positioning in the marketplace. To do this effectively, you need to pay attention to two broad communication categories.

Language: *Communicate your branding message explicitly*

“When most advisors are asked, what do you do? they talk about their process,” says Wershing. “But nobody cares about your process. They talk about the disciplines that they use. But those are the same from advisor to advisor. What they don’t talk about is the difference, right up-front,” he says. “That ought to be the first thing out of your mouth, is the

helping them reach them. And then there’s aspirations.”

Vollbrecht thinks this last element may be the most important, because it has an emotional component. “The difference between a goal and an aspiration is that a goal could be: *I want enough money to retire.* An aspiration is thinking about it differently: *this is the legacy that I want to leave for my family.* Or: *this is the legacy I want to leave for my community.*

“Brand communication will always work best if there is an aspirational element that sets it apart differently,” she adds. “Even if it’s toilet paper, people buy on emotion. And so by tapping into someone’s

Of all the aspects of branding, the most confusing to advisors is likely to be the “look and feel” of it. Vollbrecht says that visual communication goes far beyond the company logo, to include how you consistently use colors, texture, visuals—even the voice you have on your voice mail.

To know how to handle these variables, ask yourself some questions related to the brand you’ve just created. Do you want to be seen as a buttoned-down professional? (This implies certain “corporate” fonts that look like they belong in a newspaper. The images on the website and brochure will look highly professional, laid out in conventional ways, and have frames



around them.) Or is your firm warm and approachable? (This might imply images that convey hearth and home.) Maybe the firm is fun and not afraid to be different. (That company might use fonts that look like handwriting and have the pictures set at a diagonal.)

Beyond that, you're in uncharted terrain. "There are confident colors, power colors, warm colors, engaging colors, combinations that you can use," says Vollbrecht.

This can even extend to how your office is laid out. A firm that aspires to convey a white glove professional image might have today's issue of the Wall Street Journal in the waiting room and meet with clients around a mahogany table in the conference room. A flat screen display might show a combination of stock information as well as images about what your business does.

If you're working with the Millennial audience, you might, instead, opt to have wi-fi available in the lobby and dress in jeans to make yourself more approachable. Some advisors meet clients in a living room environment.

*Optional: create a marketing and advertising campaign around your brand*

Finally, you're ready to put together an effective advertisement to run during the Super Bowl. From her work in the marketing department at Proctor & Gamble, Vollbrecht offers some insight into how the advertising world thinks.

"In the products field, they say that you need to have 'stopping power,' where you make people stop and look at you, and you need

to have 'holding power' that causes them to look more closely at what you do. And then you need closing; to get them to actually make an appointment, sitting down face-to-face with you to understand better what you do."

That means, when you create an advertisement, you need a visual that will attract the attention of your target audience. You need a bold call to action: *here's what we're offering you right now; click here and give us*

***For an advertisement, you need a bold visual that will catch the attention of your target audience, a call to action and trigger words that resonate.***

*your information.*

"Now that you understand who you're talking to and what people want to accomplish, you find some trigger words to pull them in," says Vollbrecht. "The combination of trigger words and trigger images is really the best," she adds, "and then you can use it through multiple channels: email, billboard, direct mail, sponsoring webinars, seminars, and any offers that you do jointly with other professionals that you work with, like lawyers, CPAs and insurance advisors. You have a concept that you're using to bring them to you, and then it will be the combination of the visual, the tone and the key call to action or the words that bring that concept to life."

At this historic moment in the financial planning profession, when advisors everywhere are going to have to define and defend their value

against the online commoditizers, it's important that we achieve a wider understanding of marketing. And marketing appears to start with this nebulous concept of branding.

"Established brands tend to be more trusted in the market," says Swift. "People feel more comfortable and safe choosing things and people they know. Smart advisory firms," she says, "work to become a 'known entity,' and increasingly they will have a variety of brand elements

come together to create a brand identity."

As Asnes pointed out earlier, you have a brand right now. But the one you created by accident and happenstance—saying that you are not a broker or salesperson, for instance—may not be compelling until it has been consciously sharpened, and effectively communicated in a consistent way. If you want to stand out from the competition—robo or the brokerage firm down the street—then this is where you start.

If you ever decide to create a new foundation for your marketing outreach, consider this article as a first introduction into the mysteries of branding. ■

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