

Flourish or Fail—Image Can Make The Difference

By Brigid O'Connor, MBA



Image is a mental impression held in common by members of a group.

What mental impression does your firm or company evoke?

Perceptions. Customers rely on them when determining our effectiveness as service providers, and prospective clients see them as clues to our talent or lack thereof. Perceptions distill down to the essence of image. Image matters. It's a gray and squishy concept, but image undeniably plays a role in every business win. Ignore this squishy consideration at your peril.

What is image, exactly? Image is a mental impression held in common by members of a group. What mental impression does your firm or company evoke? What effect does this have on your ability to succeed? How can image expedite your impact on important audiences?

Why be part of the pack? Image differentiates. Communications channels are insanely full, yet your firm depends on them to disseminate its messages. Your company's image is much like the packaging of a product. Packaging offers clues about the product, and your firm's image offers clues about its efficacy. Research shows that packaging weighs heavily in buyers' purchase decisions. Whether you are selling your firm's services to prospective clients, reassuring current clients that your deliverables have value, or convincing job candidates that they want to work at your company, you have to force the message through a packed channel. Hence your packaging—or image—matters.

Image can help cut through the clutter. A positive image can accelerate your message's way through communications channels. A well-defined image enables your audiences to pluck your message out of the clutter. Think, for example, of the inch of ad flyers that arrive with the Sunday newspaper. Whether you're a devoted Target shopper or not, you can easily find the

Target ad in the pile because you recognize its look and feel. The logo is familiar; the color palette, font, and paper weight are consistent over time; and the store's character is clear in your mind. Target's image helps get its messages to its audience effectively.

Service Recovery

An appropriate image can bolster a firm in bad times. Image has a serious impact on customer perceptions. Research shows that a company with a good image can survive the occasional customer who complains of a bad service experience. But even the best image can't survive repeated bad service experiences—the image will erode. If your firm already has a poor image, your clients react more negatively to bad service. A negative image presents a formidable roadblock as you struggle to communicate in a fiercely competitive marketplace.

Authenticity

Just like product packaging, a company's image must reflect reality. If the packaging indicates that laundry soap is inside, customers don't expect to find cat litter. A carefully constructed and consistent image helps a business flourish only if people's experiences of the firm are congruent with the image. If you portray your organization as open, friendly, and inviting, yet put a cranky receptionist at the front desk, the discrepancy will thwart success. Image must reflect your firm's true nature, not a version based on wishful thinking.

Also, consider your competition, your clients, and those you wish to serve. Crafting an image that mimics your competition serves no purpose. Conduct a competitive analysis and develop your firm's image in a distinctive direction.

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Missing the mark?

Effective images are more about those on the receiving end than those doing the sending. Hence, verify that your firm's image resembles the impression your audiences have of it. Some firms might believe they convey an understated image—but the audience sees them as boring. Some companies may hope to convey innovation—yet audiences might see just flashy. Many organizations rely on symbolism in logos and taglines, but too often the symbolism is lost on audiences that aren't in the know. A successfully positioned firm conjures a distinct image at the mention of its name.

Image also can magnetize a firm to attract coveted clients. The most obvious examples are companies that seek customers with high net-worth. Communicate with these prospects using quality letterhead and precise, engaging, grammatically correct language. Make your image work for you.

Contributing Factors to Image

Where do audiences get the perceptions that result in their image of your firm? Typically, they find clues about your image in:

- **Presentation:** What messages do your firm's promotional materials and correspondence convey? What signals does the appearance of your employees and office send?
- **Knowledge:** Can audiences detect the level of knowledge housed in your firm? What evidence do you display?
- **Visibility:** Do your audiences consider your firm an involved member of the world around it? Do they know about your civic activities, articles written by firm employees, instances when firm principals served as media sources, or organizations that chose your members for leadership positions?

- **Service:** How does your company's service rate with the people who matter? What do clients say about your listening skills, follow-through, responsiveness, and accuracy?

Conduct an inventory of your firm's image to learn where your audiences believe it stands. Check with staff and clients, too. Compare the findings to see if you all agree or if there are gaps in perceptions. These gaps represent opportunities for image improvement. This simple analysis can produce dramatic results as you strive to improve your image and the frequency of business wins.

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