How the law profession adjusts to competitive changes in the UK

The UK legal industry is currently navigating a state of transition and flux, largely brought on by a sharp, unrelenting increase in competition. This level of change has led to an increasingly fragmented industry, as individual law firms make sense of and respond to these changes in different ways. Technology, and website design in particular, provides firms with the opportunity to make quicker, more regular changes to their externally-projected image as industry changes unfold, whilst internally maintaining their status quo.

When we consider the professions, technology is not often the first thing that comes to mind. We would be excused for this, as research has shown that well-established, long-standing professions have traditionally placed technology, and in particular, virtual marketing initiatives such as website design, pretty low in their list of priorities. Despite bare minimum use of technology being sufficient in the past, the changing, shifting commercial landscape for professions now necessitates a greater level of investment in these areas, if organisations want to stand out from the crowd.

As one of the most traditional, long-standing professions, law poses an especially insightful empirical setting to investigate. With regulatory changes signalling unprecedented changes within the UK legal industry in recent years, precisely how law firms make sense of, and respond to, these changes has been left largely un-researched. Changes, not least through the passage of the Legal Services Act 2007, have signalled a sharp increase in the level of competition, with the introduction of a much wider range of legal service providers, made possible under the alternative business structure format. In light of this, it is ever more imperative for legal businesses to stay one step ahead and differentiate themselves from others.

My recent research looks at this dynamic with a particular focus on the use of technology in symbolising changes in organisation identity, as a result of wider industry-level change.

Organisational identity, representing the "who are we?" of a given firm, has often been conceptualised as the external image firms project of themselves to the wider world, most notably towards their clients and competitors. Company websites provide us with an insight into various aspects of organisational identity, from company culture, to values, to areas of specialism and expertise.

By selecting a law firm which has engaged in multiple website evolutions, I was able to identify the impact of industry-level change on law firm identity, as expressed through a greater reliance upon, and use of, technology. My findings indicate that company websites provide firms with a means of "window dressing", whereby they can advocate a specific image of themselves to the outside world, an image which is often not matched within the firm itself. At first, this may not be so big a surprise – after all, how many of us have fallen victim to a fancy marketing strategy which didn't quite live up to our expectations? We are not new to the idea of companies, whether within the professions or within other industries, selling us the dream, yet never delivering on this.

What is new however, is the inherent link between the façade firms present in their website design, and their own uncertainty and confusion around changes taking place within the wider industry. My findings illustrate how law firms, when designing their websites, adopt interesting techniques and structural aesthetics, in order to project an image, or identity, which matches their *perceived* view of what the legal industry requires of them.

But how do law firms decide what the legal industry expects of them? This is what makes law firms in particular, interesting to investigate. My research highlights that the "rules of the game", namely the various aspects law firms should embody if they are to continue to exist and compete within the legal industry, are increasingly unclear in light of ongoing industry level changes. Should law firms offer a one-stop-shop of legal services, or should they specialise in one area of law? Should firms maintain and uphold an air of professional traditionalism or should they be modern and more entrepreneurial?

With such a high speed and rate of change taking place within the industry in recent years, my findings indicate that individual firms have found it difficult to identify and keep up with industry expectations, and have therefore relied on a significant amount of guesswork in their marketing strategies. This is reflected in a wide variety of website designs across UK-based law firms, even to the extreme some firms have taken where their website homepage does not even state that they offer legal services.

So, what does this tell us as legal consumers? The UK legal industry is currently navigating a state of transition and flux, largely brought on by a sharp, unrelenting increase in competition. This level of change has led to an increasingly fragmented industry, as individual law firms make sense of and respond to these changes in different ways. Technology, and website design in particular, provides firms with the opportunity to make quicker, more regular changes to their externally-projected image as industry changes unfold, whilst internally maintaining their status quo.

Thus, company websites can be powerful tools, not only in telling us what an organisation does and what they stand for, but conversely, it may also simply be used to present a façade, hiding what they truly stand for and how they execute their services. It goes to show, you should "never judge a book by its cover".

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Notes:

- *This blog post draws on the author's PhD thesis, [Institutional logics and intra-organisational dynamics: understanding changes in the organisational identity of a UK law firm](#), University of Nottingham.*
- *The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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