

Coming to Grips with “Average” – The Strategic Challenge for (Most) Law Firms

By [Joseph B. Altonji](#) on July 25, 2013

Over the weekend I had the good fortune of attending college orientation with my youngest son, who is entering one of the premier schools in the country for what he wants to do. The room was filled with eager students who had just graduated at or near the tops of their respective high school classes. As with most orientations (this is my third...), the sessions were filled with all sorts of information about what will change in the entering students' lives, what parents need to know, and the like. One component was noticeably different – a clear message to parents about how to deal with the situation when your student learns he or she is just “average.”

How could most of these top performing young men and women be “just average”? The game, for them, has changed, and the competition just got a lot harder. In this crowd, “average” is pretty good – but it's still average and that's where most of them will fall. It's hard not to draw incredible parallels to the legal industry today. Most firms are, in fact, just average. Average in terms of brain power. Average in terms of service. Legal knowledge? Profitability? Reputation? Efficiency? You name it, most firms cluster somewhere around the center of the Bell Curve. It's a hard message for many lawyers who are used to being (or at least believing they are) the best, or the smartest guy in the room, or whatever else they believe. Coming to grips with this reality is strategic imperative number one for most firms today, because by framing the issue in this way it is possible to begin to think about how to break out from the crowd, or rise to the top of the smaller, far more relevant, cohort.

The Dean of Students focused his message on how to help your student stand out from the crowd. You can't give them more brain power or additional capabilities they might wish they had. They have what they have. Once the game is set, choices dictate outcomes. How can a student make himself stand out? By being different. By sitting near the front and center of a large lecture classroom and asking questions and participating. By going to office hours to explore “how to learn more about X” that piqued their interest in the lecture (while simultaneously burning their name into the professor's consciousness).

How can an “average” law firm stand out? No matter what you do you can't be the “best” law firm – and you could never prove it if you were! You can, however, do things differently. You can find a different combination of behaviors, processes and approaches that makes you different from all the other law firms out there, and that combination, if firmly established, can drive a differentiation strategy for the firm. Will the average IQ of the lawyers increase? Nope. Will the firm's commercial success level improve? You bet! The key is to stop trying to be something you can't and start focusing on how to best utilize the resources and assets you have.

Differentiation is the key to strategic success. For most firms, trying to be “the best” is a fool's errand, but making your firm different has a real shot. Most of the students entering my son's new school will have a tough awakening in a few months at the end of the first term – and will be happy to be average. Hopefully then they will sit back and say – I'm not the smartest person in the room anymore, but I can find a way to succeed and thrive here, and I am going to go for it. Most of our law firms should follow the lead of these young students.