

The Client-Focused Business Model: Myth or Reality

By [LawVision](#) on April 23, 2014

In my last blog post, [Why Client Service is Not a One-Size-Fits-All Proposition](#), I discussed the dramatic shifts in client thinking and how uniquely tailored approaches to service delivery are entering the world of law firms. The last paragraph posed a challenge: how to deliver optimal service to clients who may want many different things. There is no single business model (especially in today’s law firms) which allows for one firm to keep all clients happy. And – hold onto your seats – nor should there be. Instead, the key to deliver a truly unique differentiated experience is to define your core – and to be better at it than any other competitor in the market. Then, you can grow and expand in ways you may have never thought possible.

A few weeks ago at the Legal Marketing Association annual conference, I had the pleasure of hearing [Kat Cole, President of Cinnabon](#), deliver a presentation on leadership and driving innovation. Throughout her program she frequently harkened back to a single word: indulgence. As part of virtually every management decision, including product launches, strategic alliances and brand extensions, she sought to answer the question – will the indulgence our customers have for our sweet, addictive pastry translate to indulgence for (fill in the blank). (As it turns out, when you fill in the blank with vodka, it does, she shared.)

With this seemingly simple question, Kat Cole and Cinnabon encapsulated their core differentiator – the single characteristic which connected them to their customers. She described counterintuitive strategies, such as shrinking to grow, and counterintuitive synergies, such as a partnership with on-the-surface competitor Pillsbury, that built upon that core yet stretched traditional ways of doing business to drive success. In short, she led her company to embrace change and business models which were varied, sometimes innovative, occasionally counterintuitive – but always directly motivated by a single client-focused theme: indulgence.

Today’s law firms find themselves similarly situated. Their growth stymied by market pressures and the path forward unclear. Yet virtually none have defined their core connection to clients as succinctly and singularly as Kat Cole and Cinnabon. And let’s face it – it’s not easy. Defining and embracing a core inevitably means directing focus away from other pieces (and potentially clients) that got you to where you are today.

The age of being the law firm that can deliver everything to everyone is long gone. In its place is client demand for an increasingly tailored experience. The law firms quickest to define and embrace their core will thrive in the coming years. Here are a few examples of client-focused approaches – and the associated business models that best support them:

| Client Priority | Business Model Characteristics |
|-------------------------|--|
| Value | process improvement and project management; leverage; routine; efficiencies |
| Innovation | smart minds and new ideas; brainstorming; not conducive to billable hour model; creativity and “space”; non-hierarchal; less structured; e.g., IPNav |
| Preventative Law | seasoned, experienced lawyers; practical business savvy; understanding of operational and/or financial risk; e.g., Duane Morris’ DNA |
| Proactive Law | opportunity-oriented; big picture visionaries; well-connected movers and shakers; e.g., Google and Samsung license-sharing agreement |
| Virtual Law | technology-driven solutions; e.g., Perkins Coie start-up kit |

Now that your creative juices are flowing – what is it going to take for your firm to define – and embrace – its core differentiator? 1) Talk to your clients; 2) Candidly self-assess your strengths; and 3) make the difficult decisions. Once

again channeling Kat Cole: "If not you, who? If not now, when?"