

Trust Your Gut and Other Unconventional Wisdom for Law Firm Leaders

By [LawVision](#) on July 29, 2015

Two years ago I had the good fortune to experience a transformational moment in my life. At a remote location in the heart of Sedona, Arizona, I learned to quiet the (incessant) chatter of my (overactive) mind and to truly hear my inner voice. Today, this is the voice I strive to listen to most often. Unlike the voice of reason or a message weaved together by analyzing hundreds of data points (an activity with which I am intimately familiar), one's inner voice does not find solace in a foundation of logic. It can be difficult to defend – both to others and to one's self. Yet it is perhaps the most powerful tool available for making decisions; and one that can have the greatest positive impact on you personally and on your firm.

Successful entrepreneurs from Steve Jobs to Shark Tank's Barbara Corcoran have espoused the value of intuition and gut instinct in achieving great success. Great thinkers agree, including Einstein whose opinion was "The only real valuable thing is intuition," and Lao Tzu who wrote, "The power of intuitive understanding will protect you from harm until the end of your days." More recently, neuroscientist [António Damásio](#), professor at the University of Southern California and head of The Brain and Creativity Institute, demonstrated unequivocally the link between emotion and decision-making. Damásio writes of his patient, Elliot, who sustained damage to his ventromedial frontal lobe, the part of the brain associated with emotions. Without access to his emotions, Elliot gets stuck in a constant loop of deliberation between options. Though his logic and analytical skills are intact, Elliot is incapable of making decisions because he is not able to apply the emotional factor to his choices.

In other words, facts and logic alone are not enough. There is an innate component, steeped in experience and feelings, that provides cues as to which of the facts will lead to a more optimal outcome. As our industry makes the (glacial) move to adopting a more data-driven approach to business development, strategy and overall decision-making, it is essential that we not lose sight of the critical role our inner voice can play in getting us to the best outcome.

Taking it one step further, consider how Damasio's research influences critical business choices from a client's decision to hire your firm to your Executive Committee's decision to bring on a new lateral or open a new office. The frame of mind or personal connection one has about or to the decision is just as influential as the evidence presented. This is why when we make decisions, it will serve us well to listen to our internal instincts or "gut feelings." Moreover, practicing the art of listening to this oft-silenced voice will help to gain clarity into what our instincts are telling us. On a personal level, one can exercise this skill through a number of avenues including:

Mindfulness – Getting in touch with your inner voice through meditation, during your morning jog or any other activity that enables you to focus on the present moment.

Trusting your gut – Learning to interpret that uneasy feeling you get, perhaps as a tightening in your chest or tension in your belly, that signals something is not right. A technique I learned in Sedona is to breathe deeply while mentally telling yourself something true – your age, for example – and sensing the feeling in your gut. Then deliberately change your message to something false – a false age, in keeping with the same example – and feel the difference, the muscle tightening or loss of air.

In a leadership role, this insight can be equally valuable. As we consider our analysis and the presentation of data and facts to state our case, we must also consider how to evoke the right emotional response to the information being presented. A few techniques to help engage others and encourage the “decision-making frame of mind,” include:

1. Telling a story

Storytelling is one of the most effective ways to imprint an emotion and memory on others. The book “Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die” by Heath brothers Chip and Dan provides a wealth of examples of how anecdotes, urban legends and experiments gather power through their ability to tap into human sensory emotions. Their premise is that the “stickiest” ideas are those that tap into SUCCESs principles – Simple, Unexpected, Concrete, Credible, Emotional, Stories. Consider your own experience and what presentations, commercials or images created a lasting impact. When presenting information, weave in examples and analogies to help trigger an emotional or instinctual response. This approach will help elicit stronger connections to the information and, ideally, better decision-making.

2. Connecting with core values

Coca-Cola’s recent packaging campaigns in India and the Middle East are potent examples of how to use a message to arouse an instinctive response. In these campaigns, Coca-Cola’s already visually powerful cans eschew the trendy names and labels in favor of blank space and a reverse-side message reading “Labels are for cans not for people.” In driving a connection to an individual’s core beliefs, Coca-Cola not only places the company in a positive light (particularly among socially minded Millennials who, as a cohort, are one of the largest in the Middle East – and, interestingly, one [uniting around their shared youth](#)) but also stimulates a subconscious link to a positive emotional undercurrent.

Law firms, too, use this approach. It shines most boldly in recruiting and areas related to pro bono work, environmental responsibility and workplace diversity; but, there are other powerful examples including Goulston & Storrs’ recent social media campaign celebrating the Supreme Court decision to support gay marriage. Regardless of one’s personal stance, Goulston’s immediate celebratory response provided a point of connection and evoked an emotional response in keeping with their largely liberal market and client base. All in all, though, the extent to which law firms have used this technique to influence decisions – for clients, recruits and others – has not yet reached its full potential.

3. Creating an experience

In an age of Starbucks, the Hard Rock Café and Chuck E. Cheese, it is difficult to go about life today without noting the transformation from selling goods and services to selling an experience – an interaction replete with atmosphere and engagement to spark certain emotions. It was the late 90’s when Joseph Pine II and James Gilmore first published their book *The Experience Economy*. As the duo wrote in a related 1998 [article for the Harvard Business Review](#), “While prior economic offerings—commodities, goods, and services—are external to the buyer, experiences are inherently personal, existing only in the mind of an individual who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual level.”

For law firms, the transition from selling a service to an experience has been a slow one, and one that few have tackled. Yet in our midst there are examples of firms like Allen & Overy who are shifting to a holistic model of servicing clients or Nixon Peabody, whose new office environments change the daily experience of their professionals. What if, instead of providing legal services, your law firm could interact with clients in a way that

truly engages their inner being? Or if you as a leader could tap into people's primitive drivers to motivate attorneys in new ways? This tact would be sure to raise some eyebrows, at least, and leverage the value of the unexpected in creating a lasting impression.

So as we delve ever deeper into the dimensions of big data, let's not lose sight of the most valuable aspect of what makes our firms unique and successful – its people. Tapping into the instincts and intuition of our combined resources will surely help to leverage information to the right conclusion; and, ideally, to avoid unnecessary harm along the way.