

You've Got to Tell the Story Right...

By [Joseph B. Altonji](#) on May 17, 2016

It seems law firms everywhere are going back to basics. Who are we and where are we going? What is our strategy? What are we trying to do? Simple questions, all, but not so simple to answer – at least if you want to answer with something other than Pabulum. If you are going to make the effort to answer them, you should make the commitment to do it well.

Why is this so hard? Actually, defining the strategy is usually the easy part. The hard part is figuring out what the problem is. In his excellent 2011 book, [Good Strategy, Bad Strategy](#), Richard Rumelt defines a “good strategy” as a coherent response to a clearly articulated obstacle or challenge. You cannot develop a good strategy if you don’t understand the problem you are trying to address. Unfortunately, this is the part that trips up so many law firms, whether because of the natural urgency inherent in most lawyers’ personalities, because it is really hard and requires a great deal of introspection, or simply because they don’t realize just how important this is.

When I think about the puzzle most firms face in formulating a good strategy, I am often reminded of the 2003 John Travolta movie [“Basic.”](#) Although left with clues throughout the movie, Osborne, the female lead character, only realizes at the end that the key to understanding what she is dealing with lies in recognizing what the supporting characters repeated in the movie: “All we got to do is tell the story right...” We live in an extremely complex world, and data surrounds us everywhere. But data is not knowledge, and information is not understanding. Most partners in most law firms can supply you with abundant facts and information that relate to the circumstances the firm faces. Surprisingly few can, without considerable work, “tell the story right.” Good strategy, though, is dependent on telling the story right. Until you get the starting point correct – the challenge defined – you cannot hope to formulate a good strategy other than through sheer luck.

If your firm is considering undertaking a strategy development effort, resist the temptation to adopt the fastest, least intrusive approach. Instead, embrace the challenge of compiling a range of relevant information and then invest the time, energy and resources necessary to “tell the story right.” Examine that data from multiple perspectives. Question your own assumptions and those held by your partners. Think about alternative explanations for why a set of circumstances prevails. Question the “little lies” that every organization tells themselves – “our competitors are nowhere near as good as we are”; “most firms have horrible cultures and their lawyers hate being there”; “we provide much better value than those national firms because our rates are so much lower and we don’t overstaff.” You get the point...

At the conclusion of this exercise, you should be able to clearly state the challenge(s) your firm faces. (All firms face challenges, but not all the same one!) Only then should you begin the process of formulating the strategy: What are you going to do about whatever challenge(s) the firm faces? However, if you cannot clearly articulate the story, you are not done with phase one. Go back to the beginning, reexamine the data, add new perspectives. Most importantly, bring your partners along and be sure they agree, because without agreement on the challenge, they will never wholeheartedly support the strategy.

It is far too easy to simply pile up the facts and figures and jump immediately into developing the “strategy” without ever clearly defining the problem, but we urge you to resist the temptation. Take the time to learn to tell the story right. In the end, your firm will be the beneficiary.

