



The liberation of marketers in the new mid-tier independent landscape

One of the greatest challenges professional services marketers will face during coming years is how they respond to the consolidation of the market. However, it is this shifting industry dynamic that could ironically bring with it the greatest opportunities for those marketers working outside the global elite.

In very simplistic terms, on one side we have the newly merged international top-tiers – on the other side we have the mid-tier firms, the independents and the boutiques. Where those on the latter side will fit into the market may not become clear for years to come as the professional services battleground continues to change, however, one thing is for sure; this is an exciting time for marketers working for independent firms.

For many business development managers, marketing specialists and communications professionals working for legal, accounting and consulting organisations, the shift in the size and structure of professional services firms is the perfect opportunity to challenge their skills and creativity. But on which side of the ‘merged versus independent’ fence will they find their call of duty? Which side will liberate them from the daily tender writing, the endless league table submissions and the two page brochures?

Whereas the marketing strategies of the top tier firms are likely to be dictated by their size, global brand presence and established reputation, independent firms across the Asia Pacific, often in the mid-tier bracket, have the opportunity to carve out a niche in this tighter market by developing their individuality. Many marketers may now see the mid-tier as providing more job satisfaction with more scope and more opportunities to test their abilities as they respond quickly to define their organisation’s place in an increasingly global environment.

Fire power versus speed and agility

Recent years have seen the largest law firms, particularly in Australia, enter into international alliances and move from what was traditionally known as the “Big Six” to what Beaton Research & Consulting has described as the “global elite”.

This shifting landscape where “national” has become “global”, has left many independent firms still trying to work out who they are and who they need to become to stay competitive in the professional services marketplace. However, there are real lessons to be learned from the experience of other industries, such as higher education and engineering, where the larger institutions and businesses have during recent years chosen to go global while others have concentrated on providing more intimate and flexible services on home soil.

A significant marketing advantage of the domestic and often less bureaucratic organisations is the fact that they can respond easily and quickly to market change due to their smaller size. The big guy has the fire power but the little guy will often have the speed and agility to manoeuvre into a position of

advantage before they are blown out of the water. The challenge for marketers in independent firms will be to get into position quickly and claim their territory.

In fact, there is a clear premium space opening up between the mid-tier and the top-tier for proudly domestic, fiercely independent and intensely client focused firms. It will take a clear strategy by the marketers working for these firms, using new and innovative advertising campaigns, branding techniques and ways of providing key messages, to place these firms on the right course.

For many marketers this challenge will provide a unique opportunity that a role in a global firm, where the strategy is already more clearly defined, can't.

Setting the strategy

In many ways, it is planning the strategy rather than executing it that is the "fun" and challenging part of being a professional services marketer. But how many mid-level marketers in a global firm would sit down with the Executive or the Managing Partner and discuss strategy? Very few.

The tighter budgets, smaller teams and direct responsibility for developing the brand within the independent firms means interaction, consultation and sharing of ideas between Partners and all levels of staff is an essential part of the day-to-day marketing business.

But it's not just a question of who is setting the agenda; it's also about what that overall strategy is. In this respect, we are likely to see a much clearer market differentiation between the global elite and the independent firms. Many would argue that the strategy of the larger firms is essentially being driven by their international presence – we are bigger, we have more resources and we are full service. How can an independent firm find its place in this global market? It's a daunting challenge but that's what makes the job for these marketers so rewarding.

Marketers in the mid-tier will need to find the creativity to position their firms so that they clearly offer clients something that the globals can't. Will they do this by presenting themselves as being focused on a more intimate service delivery? Will it be through the presentation of a "proud to be local" story. Or will it be the utilisation of new marketing technologies and more innovative campaigns. Whatever, the solution, the retaliation of the independent firm marketers against the global empires of the Big Six will be exciting.

It is this challenge that some professional services marketers are starting to grab with both hands as an opportunity to direct their firm's strategy and claim a new space in the sector.

Reclaiming the middle ground

There was once a time when "mid tier" or "independent" were dirty words among professional services marketers. Who would want to be in the middle when they could be sitting on top as part of a multinational brand? But this notion of job superiority is quickly changing as those at the highest levels of the chain of command in Australia, New Zealand and Asia now have to build their regional campaigns around a bigger global picture.

The decision professional services marketers are making when they read a position description is: "do I want to work for a global firm where I might just become part of the worldwide machine or do I want to work for an independent where I get to make the decisions, have a direct involvement in effecting real change and in doing so get more of a sense of job satisfaction?"

Large firms are going through a time of immense change as their story becomes a global one and this is giving mid-tier and independent firms in the Asia Pacific the chance to differentiate themselves and

claim a new space in the market; it is forcing the independents to reconsider their branding, their service offering and their culture.

This isn't to say that if you're anything but the head marketer at a global firm, you're not going to have any kind of job satisfaction. For example, in Australia where some sectors of the industry are very parochial, the challenge of integrating a global brand into the market will be significant. However, as the new middle ground of independent firms opens up and those on the mid-tier side of the professional services battlefield become more cost competitive, have fewer conflicts and become less aligned with their traditional roots in a particular State or city, there are opportunities for marketers working in this sector to shape the future direction of their firms as they present to clients a refreshing alternative.

We are still a few years away from knowing what the Asia Pacific independent mid-tier will look like, and what it will stand for, but it will be the marketers working in it, liberated from the restrictions of global branding guidelines, who will fly the flag for their firms.

Five tips for marketers working in the new mid-tier independent sector

1. Think about what differentiates your firm from others and build your firm's story around what will make you stand out from the rest.
2. Be flexible and open to change. The professional services industry across the Asia Pacific is changing rapidly and we as marketers have to adapt to it or be left behind.
3. Where the mid-tier independent firms have a clear advantage is their ability to develop a more intimate and personal relationship with their clients. This is something we should pay close attention to in the way we market to clients.
4. Don't be afraid of being in the middle. The mid-tier has a lot to offer clients and we should be proud to highlight the advantages of being lean and agile.
5. Importantly, on a more personal level, think about what is going to give you the most job satisfaction. The mid-tier can be a great sector to work in if you are willing to take on a new



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