



Branding Strategies for A/E/C Firms

By Karl Feldman

If you asked any A/E/C firm whether a strong brand was important, you'd be hard-pressed to find one that would tell you "no." Yet, many firms struggle to define their brand—much less institute effective branding strategies. This begs the question: Is it time for a rebrand?

Rebranding A/E/C firms involves more than changing your firm's logo. It requires transforming your entire brand and message to communicate your firm's true story and strategy.

So, for starters what, exactly, is a "brand" in the first place?

When it comes to branding, there are a lot of common misconceptions out there. That's why, before we get into exactly what a brand is, let's discuss what it isn't:

- Your brand is not your firm's name
- Your brand is not your logo or tagline
- Your brand is not your website or marketing collateral
- Your brand is not your mission statement
- Your brand is not your advertising

In fact, strong branding is best viewed through three lenses: overall firm branding, personal branding, and employer branding. All three are crucial to a strong brand foundation—and all three are connected in important ways that contribute directly to your firm's success.

Let's break down each type of branding and the necessary role it plays in a complete branding strategy.

Overall Firm Branding

Your firm's overall branding is most easily represented by a simple equation:

$$\text{Branding} = \text{Reputation} \times \text{Visibility}$$

A strong brand demonstrates your expertise to prospective clients, while building trust and allowing them to experience your firm's approach. Successful overall branding should be driven to answer two key questions: Who are your audiences? How are you reaching out to them?

These questions are best answered by a combination of the following:

- A well-defined target audience
- Your firm's relevance to the success of the target audience
- A premium position in the marketplace
- An excellent reputation in the industry
- High visibility

Here's where the lines between your overall firm branding, personal branding, and employer branding begin to blur. That's because one of the best ways to achieve a premium position in the marketplace, an excellent reputation in your industry, and higher visibility is through the visible expertise of your employees. This, in turn, becomes the visible expertise of your firm.

Personal Branding

According to Hinge's *2018 High Growth Study: AEC Edition*, the number-one threat to the A/E/C industries over the next three to five years is a shortage of top talent, with 45 percent of respondents identifying this fear. One way to combat this threat is by increasing the visibility of your firm and encouraging your current employees to advance their own individual visible expertise.

Having a staff with a strong personal brand contributes to the success of your firm branding and future growth. Hiring visible experts or encouraging current employees to advance their visibility contributes to firm growth through the ability to attract more new prospects and charge premium prices. In fact, according to one of our recent studies, visible experts categorized as having internationally recognized visibility are able to charge over 13 times more than the average professional.

Of course, improving the personal branding of experts within your firm isn't something that can happen overnight.

Instead, it takes dedication and strategy to increase the visibility of your firm and your individual employees. When polled, buyers identified writing a book as the most effective marketing tool for visible expertise. However, you don't have to wait to publish a best-seller to begin improving personal branding. Other tactics—like blogging, speaking engagements, and a freshly designed and well-maintained company website—can also go a long way in establishing personal brand.

Beyond these benefits, strong personal branding is also closely connected to employer branding—the third and final type of branding.

Employer Branding

Unlike your overall firm brand and personal brand, which are designed to attract prospects, your employer brand is what you present to the recruiting audience. There are many reasons a firm may consider rebranding and many of them are rooted in the need to reposition the firm within the marketplace. A strong employer brand allows your firm to recruit top talent and connect with strong teaming partners while bolstering the perception of your brand in the eyes of your prospective employees.

In developing your employer brand, you're answering a recruit's question, "Why should I want to work for you?" The messaging you develop and the way you answer that question can greatly affect the caliber and type of employee your firm attracts.

How can your firm strengthen its employer brand? The ideal process follows six steps:

1. **Consider your firm's overall growth strategy.** Where do you want your firm to be in five years? Ten years?

2. **Research your prospects and competitors.** Understand your audience; it's the most important step of any branding strategy.
3. **Develop your employer brand strategy.** This step should clearly outline how you want to communicate your brand to your prospective employees.
4. **Build the tools to communicate the brand.** Next, figure out how you will communicate your brand.
5. **Launch the new brand.** Put your strategy into action.
6. **Optimize for visibility and impact.** After the initial launch, determine any improvements that can be made.

Connecting Branding Strategies for Higher Growth

Growth rates among A/E/C firms are slowing, with the median growth rate falling from 10.3 percent in 2016 to 9.1 percent in 2017, while consolidation and competition is on the rise. The only way to ensure your firm doesn't fall victim to these statistics is by taking a proactive approach. Developing these three branding strategies—your overall firm branding, personal branding, and employer branding—in tandem allows your firm to develop the most thorough understanding of your audiences and gives you the best chance of positioning your firm for effective engagement. While each branding strategy may be distinct, they are all related. Connecting your efforts to take a three-pronged approach to branding can give your firm the edge it needs to attract new clients, increase your market visibility, and recruit top talent. ■