




PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Brand-building tips for small firms and sole practitioners

Whether it's something quirky, such as flying to work, or more mainstream, creating a brand can help you grow your business.

By Cheryl Meyer



Kristy Armstrong, CPA, CGMA, calls herself The Fabulous Flying CPA, combining her love of flying with her profession.

Kristy Armstrong, CPA, CGMA, is passionate about two things (well, three, if you count her dogs): She loves being an accountant, and she loves being a pilot. So, a few years back, she combined her two passions and created a memorable and successful brand: The Fabulous Flying CPA. Armstrong, who makes use of both her pilot and CPA licenses when she flies to see clients on Block Island, off the coast of Rhode Island, where she lives, said her image as an airborne accountant is a conversation generator that helps her win business.

Whether it's something quirky, such as flying to work, or more mainstream, such as serving a specialized market, creating a brand can help you grow a business and stand out in a crowded market.

"A brand is the story that comes to mind when others think of you," said Barrett Young, CPA, founder of The Green Abacus, a La Plata, Md., firm that embraces a superhero theme to appeal to its target market of technology companies. "It's that lasting impression that we all personally leave."

A brand can also be a marketing tool and a "fact

"A brand is the story that comes to mind when others think of you."

Barrett Young, CPA, founder of The Green Abacus

or concept that people associate automatically with a type and level of service," said New York City's Steven Zelin, CPA, founder of the firm Steven Zelin, CPA, LLC, and a musician who has become known as "The Singing CPA." Zelin, who sings at accounting functions and plays guitar on a local post office's steps every April 15, said his branding has helped attract "many creative types" to his practice, including fellow singers, actors, musicians, designers, architects, painters, and sculptors. "They realize that I 'get' them and their artistic sensibilities, and so the brand makes for a good client fit from their perspective," he said.

Some firms create a brand around the clients they serve or the qualities they want to project. Allan Koltin, CPA, the CEO of the Koltin Consulting Group in Chicago, established himself as "an adviser to multipartner CPA firms in the areas of strategy, growth, profitability," and other key business concerns through his writing and speaking.

So how do you create a brand that gets noticed? Here are some tips from CPAs who have done just that:

Be true to yourself. If you don't like golf, do not become "The Golfing CPA," and if you're uncomfortable with public speaking, podcasts may not be your ideal marketing method. Before creating their brand, "CPAs should think about who they are, what clients they like working with, and what they like to do," Zelin said.

Find your niche. Figure out your market, what industry and types of clients you want to serve, and what services you want to provide. More specialized practitioners typically can command higher billing rates than generalists. As Koltin put it, "Who makes more money—the heart surgeon or the general practitioner?"

Diane Kennedy, CPA, founder of USTaxAid.com and US TaxAid Services in Reno, Nev., created a niche providing cash flow and tax planning for real estate investors and small business owners. "If you want to do real estate tax, then narrow your focus even more," she said. "Become the expert on the mobile home market."

Editor's note

This feature is adapted from the article "Brand-Building Tips for Small Firms and Sole Practitioners," *CPA Insider*, July 27, 2015.

Invest time to build your brand. Be ready to make less money in the short term as you develop your brand. Invest half your time on billable hours and half on building your brand “for a better tomorrow,” Koltin recommended.

Publish content that cements your reputation as an expert. Koltin strengthened his brand by establishing himself as an expert in his field. He wrote an industry newsletter, conducted targeted advertising, moderated round tables, and spoke at events nationwide. Young posts podcasts and blogs on his firm’s website. Kennedy blogs, conducts webinars, and has written several books about tax strategies.

Keep your brand consistent firmwide. The Green Abacus’s brand is played out extensively on its website but also through its social media and customer service efforts. “Our superhero culture comes through in the playfulness we use on the website, from our font and color choice and logo to the way we use featured images on our monthly emails to customers and the links we share on our Facebook page,” Young said. He also gives his clients free tickets to superhero movies.

Take advantage of social media. Use platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter—and, of course, your website—to cement your

brand and gain business. Try podcasting, hosting a webinar, or posting a video on YouTube. Even business cards can be used to promote your brand if you incorporate your logo, colors, or slogan.

Network. One way Armstrong built her business was by joining Business Network International (BNI), a group that introduces professionals in various fields who then make referrals to one another. BNI helped Armstrong create her brand by requiring a catchy “60-second elevator speech” that encouraged her to distill her message into a brief sound bite. Also, consider attending Meetup groups, conferences, Chamber of Commerce events, and other networking functions. These events give you the opportunity to attract attention, speak to others about your brand, and possibly gain business.

Don’t go too far. It is possible to go overboard when creating a brand. “If the brand becomes so dominant or attention-getting that the business it represents is lost in the shuffle, it’s time to dial back the promotion of the brand because, clearly, it is outweighing the promotion of the business itself,” Zelin said.

Finally, take the plunge. CPAs need to take a leap of faith and then work to establish their brands over time. “There is no cookbook,” Koltin said. “You have to be a self-starter. You have to go for it.” ■

About the author

Cheryl Meyer (meyerwrites@gmail.com) is a California-based freelance writer.

IN BRIEF

■ A brand is a lasting impression that CPAs personally leave with their clients. Creating a brand can help CPAs grow their business and stand out in a

crowded market.

■ A brand can be a powerful marketing tool. Some firms create a brand around the clients they serve or the qualities they want to project.

■ To build a brand, CPAs need to find

a niche and then use published content and social media to cement their reputation in that space. Joining networking groups can also help CPAs spread the word on their brand.

To comment on this article or to suggest an idea for another article, contact Chris Baysden, senior manager, newsletters, for the JofA, at cbaysden@aicpa.org or 919-402-4077.

AICPA RESOURCES

JofA article

“The Future of Marketing: Thriving in a Digital World,” June 2015, page 50

Go to journalofaccountancy.com to find past articles

E-newsletter articles

“Using LinkedIn for Prospecting,” *CPA Insider*, May 19, 2014, tinyurl.com/nv7227y

“How CPAs Can Maximize Social Media Marketing,” *CPA Insider*, Jan 21, 2014, tinyurl.com/njqc8c5

Go to journalofaccountancy.com/newsletters to find past e-newsletter articles

Publication

Bull’s-Eye! The Ultimate How-To Marketing & Sales Guide for CPAs (#090491, paperback, #090491e, ebook)

CPE self-study

Business Development—Distinctions Between Marketing and Sales (#BL1165080, one-year online access)

For more information or to make a purchase, go to cpa2biz.com or call the Institute at 888-777-7077