



The Benefits of Being Famous



Allan Koltin, CEO
Koltin Consulting Group, Inc.

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Throughout the years I have always promoted ways to differentiate yourself and your firm with your clients and prospects. I continue to be asked about this so I thought I would share some of the most common questions I hear and my response.

Q: You have always been a big proponent of industry and/or service-line expertise and have suggested it is a major differentiator with clients. Does that still hold true today?

A: One only has to look as far as the medical and legal professions to see where this trend is heading. It is safe to say that in the practice of medicine, the brain and cardio surgeons' rates dwarf that of the general family physicians. In the practice of law, the highly specialized M&A or estate planning attorney can bill out at a much higher rate than a general corporate attorney. The accounting profession is quickly catching up with the other professions in terms of specialization being a huge differentiator with clients. When I review surveys of the most profitable firms in the country (firms of all different sizes), more often than not industry or service-line expertise is the #1 reason for high profits amongst high performing firms.

Q: Could you give some examples of industry and service-line expertise?

A: It is endless in terms of which industry and/or service line a firm can choose. Each year, Accounting TODAY publishes a list of industry and service-line areas that are popular with CPA firms. Candidly, the easy part is picking an industry; the more challenging part is developing a business plan and successfully implementing.

Q: Which factors should be used to determine whether a market will support an industry or service-line expert?

A: The first question I think someone should ask is, "Is there a market need for this service in the firm's geography?" This typically is a quick calculation of the number of companies that may have a

need for this service. All major markets will typically support an industry and/or service-line expertise. Occasionally, in some smaller markets, they may have to expand their geography.

The second question that should be addressed is, “Which firm (or firms) is currently viewed as the famous firm(s) in the market and what type of market share does it have?” Often, we will find that, while an individual firm may have significant market penetration, there will also be a handful of firms dabbling in the niche without a true market leader. This stage of gathering competitive knowledge and information is critical as it will, to some degree, determine how we want to position our firm in the market.

Q: Are there any other key tangibles or intangibles that the firm should look to in assessing the market?

A: Probably the biggest item is what I refer to as the “Champion.” All great niches, whether they are industry or service line, have an individual who has a burning passion to build and excel in this practice area. Sometimes, these individuals can be homegrown. Other times, the firm needs to go to the outside and recruit or merge in the specialist. The difficulty I see with internal specialists is that they typically have what I refer to as their “day job” and, because of that, they often dabble in the niche without a lot of results. A great example of this took place years ago when everyone seemed to be getting their certification in business valuations. Ten years later, when we look at the thousands of CPAs who got their business valuation designation, probably only 5 percent have reached what I would refer to as “famous person” or “famous firm” status. Safe to say, if individuals aren’t willing to bet a significant part of their compensation on their own success, the niche is probably doomed to be nothing more than a defensive strategy and it will never take off.

Q: What is the short list of marketing tactics on which specialists usually rely to get the message out?

A: At a minimum, you can always tell someone is committed to the niche when you see that he or she speaks at the industry trade conferences and is regularly published in the industry trade journals. In addition, the specialist may be involved in an industry survey and occasionally sponsor industry roundtables where he or she serves as the moderator or chairman. Additionally, the individual and the firm should be using social media or a blog to provide periodic updates on the issues or opportunities within the industry.

Q: Are there structures within a firm that make it easier for a firm to specialize?

A: Absolutely. I guess in the extreme example, the firm would be set up by industry and service lines. Having said this, unless the firm is a boutique that is almost 100 percent committed to the niche, more often than not, industry and service-line teams are set up more as “go to market” groups. Whereby, if it is an industry niche, the individual may be part of the accounting, tax, or consulting group, but then would band together with other service-line experts to form an industry team from a marketing standpoint.

Q: In terms of funding and providing capital to grow an industry or service-line niche, what do the partners of the CPA firm need to know?

A: First, they have to have the wherewithal to know that success won't be overnight and there might be failures along the way. My favorite story is from when we had our own CPA firm and decided that technology consulting would be a great service-line niche in which to specialize. Would you believe we hired and then fired (or they left before we could fire them!) 12 different heads of technology until we found "Mr. Right" as our 13th and final hire? That individual looked at the puzzle differently than his predecessors did and said that part of the problem with our specialty was that it was too broad and not focused enough. He quickly picked nonprofits as the industry niche to which we would provide technology consulting and the practice took off exponentially!

Q: It sounds as though you are suggesting it is beneficial to combine industry and service-line expertise.

A: That, for me, is the ultimate and absolutely best way to differentiate yourself from your competition. I remember working with a firm in the South years ago that had an industry expertise in auto dealerships and a service-line expertise in business valuations. The firm combined these two niches and became the dominant firm in the region with auto dealerships when it came to anything dealing with valuation-related topics.

Q: How do you get the partners on board to support specialization?

A: I guess the first level is a financial one, in that building out the niche will require partner capital. The second level, which may be more important, is to get them to actually refer clients into the niche. This goes for existing clients of the firm (yes, this is a "give up" by some of the partners, as it could come from their own book of business), but it also relies on partners referring new clients to the industry or service-line expert. A good example of how difficult this process can be is when you talk about wealth management and financial services in CPA firms. Often, I will see a firm go into this area, either with the wrong champion or a lack of commitment on the part of the partners. Sometimes, partners will take a "wait and see" attitude because they don't want to risk their own clients having a bad experience. They will wait for other partners to first expose their own clients to see if the practice is successful. Interestingly, the same partners who are hesitant to move their high net worth clients to the firm's new wealth management practice are typically the first to get in line at the end of the year when the firm is allocating the profits from that group. To me, being a partner in the firm and not supporting an industry or service-line practice should not "entitle" a partner to receive the financial benefits that come with it. When it comes to compensation, it is what I often refer to as a "pay to play" strategy.

Q: When selecting a champion, what is important to keep in mind?

A: In addition to the point previously mentioned about selecting someone who is passionate about the niche, the champion should have available time to commit to the niche. Occasionally, firms take their most talented individual and make him or her the practice leader, only to see the niche initiative fail. If it is an internal selection, that individual needs to be freed up to spend adequate time growing the niche. I also believe that the champion should be something of a risk taker and self-starter. There is no "play book" on precisely how to launch an industry or service-line niche. You need to select someone who is: (1) willing to take a risk (both in terms of his or her own compensation and trying new things); and (2) a bit of a visionary who will try to do things that potentially no one else has done before. Additionally, I think it is critical that the leader have the ability to "sell" within the niche. Frequently, I will see firms take their best technician and put him or her in charge of the niche. This

strategy is often doomed for failure because this individual will frequently wait for the phone to ring and does not have the skill set that is needed to bring new business to the firm.

Q: Must the firm be the actual expert or deliverer of the service, or can it joint-venture with a third party or outside group?

A: Great question! In the past decade, we have seen more firms than ever before develop new service lines (and, to a lesser degree, industry niches), but partnering with a third party. This can be in the form of an alliance, a strategic relationship, or a financial investment in a separate entity. This has proven to be an exceptional strategy for many firms that didn't want to make the financial commitment required to build out the structure and/or simply didn't have or want to invest in the technical experts to build this practice area (e.g., wealth management, cost segregation, engineered tax credits, or sale of life insurance).

Q: How does one know when famous firm or famous person status is achieved?

A: This is typically easy to measure because the firms or individuals appear to be everywhere when you look at their involvement, especially if it is an industry niche focus. As I said previously, they not only speak and write for the trade journals, but they are also typically the go-to person when it comes to creating and interpreting industry surveys. They are well known by their competition and are the firm that is typically invited to propose on any new engagements. Clients seem to like the fact that the individual or firm has deep industry expertise and don't see it as a negative that they might work with competitors in the industry.

One final test as to when someone can, in fact, claim fame in the industry comes from my good friend Tom Feeley of Feeley & Driscoll in Boston. For many years, his firm has been the market leader in working with contractors. Tom once said that you know you've arrived in terms of being an industry expert when you know as much or more than a CEO of a mid-sized company within that industry. It is not just about accounting, tax, and auditing; it is about being a true business advisor and being able to strategically talk to the company about how to grow its business and improve its profitability.

About the author: Allan D. Koltin, CPA, CGMA is the CEO of Koltin Consulting Group, based in Chicago, Illinois. Allan specializes in the areas of partner compensation, firm governance, profitability, strategic planning, succession, and mergers and acquisitions. Allan can be reached at either akoltin@koltin.com or 312-805-0307.