



SPECIAL JOINT REPORT:

Branding

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A Clearline Consulting and Six Words Communication Special Joint Report

Introduction

Effective branding, marketing and communications are essential for accounting firms, no matter the size. Everything you communicate creates a unique voice that differentiates your firm from others and builds a foundation for trust with employees, clients and other important stakeholders.

In the first of a two-part Special Joint Report with Six Words Communications Corp., we will explore branding, one of three important foundational elements of marketing communications. If you are considering starting a new public practice or reinventing your brand, then this special report is for you. If you have an established brand, then you may want to skip forward to part two which focuses on marketing and client engagement.

After reading this report you will:

- Understand how branding relates to your firm's success.
- Learn ideas and strategies for developing or enhancing your firm's brand.



Branding

What is a Brand?

More than just a logo – your brand is how your business comes to life. It materializes in every interaction you have both externally and internally. Your brand is the essence of your business identity as interpreted by you, your employees, clients, service partners and the general public. Whether it's on social media, a website, via email, in face to face meetings, or through any other channel, creating and executing a consistent brand is vital to connecting with your audience.

Think of companies like Apple or Microsoft. Second Cup or Starbucks. People aren't investing in the products themselves so much as they are investing in the brand and what it represents. Then, think of people's brand loyalty to companies like Nike or Adidas. Coke or Pepsi. More often than not, people choose "their brand", a brand they trust and identify with. In the accounting world – whether they be potential employees or clients - it's just as important to develop a brand that people trust, choose and ultimately stay with.

Brand Reflection Questions for Accounting Firms

- Is your brand built on the practitioner/partners or is it something that takes on its own shape/form?
- What are the limitations of a brand built on the practitioner/partners? What are the hurdles to overcome in building a firm brand?
- How does your brand currently speak to each of these categories: existing and potential clients, service partners, existing and potential employees?



CPA Firm Naming Rules

CPA Code of Professional Conduct Rule 401 outlines several guidelines and restrictions on firm names. In general, your firm name must not be misleading, not be self-laudatory, and be in professional good taste. Ultimately, the all new or revised firm names must be approved by the Public Practice Committee or equivalent of your provincial CPA body.

Firm names based on the name(s) of the practitioner/partners are highly likely to be approved unless there is already a firm with a similar name in your local community/region. Firm names that are not derived from personal names are subject to more scrutiny and as such you will typically be asked to explain the meaning of the name and why it is appropriate for your practice.

Descriptive Style or use of “Chartered Professional Accountant”

Rule 402 sets out the requirement for using the “Chartered Professional Accountant(s)” as part of your firm name or as a descriptor of your firm. Your firm must practice under the descriptive style of “Chartered Professional Accountant(s)” unless it forms part of the firm name. This is not to be confused with your personal designation for which most of us also have a legacy designation (i.e. CPA, CGA; CPA, CA or CPA, CMA). CPA firms do not have legacy designations.

Regardless of the services you offer, the use of “Chartered Professional Accountants(s)” as part of the firm name or as a descriptive style is regarded as carrying on the practice of public accounting and thus requires registration and licensing.

Key Elements of a Brand

Key Messages

Key messages are an important part of brand positioning. Often, they capture the core of what your firm is about, the solutions you provide and how. They offer a basis for what you communicate and market to current clients and prospects, business partners, the general public and current and prospective employees.

Tip: Key messages strive to capture what you do as a firm. Try to describe your firm in two or three sentences. For example, at Clearline Consulting, our three main key messages are:

- (Who We Are) Clearline Consulting is a public practice-focused consulting firm that provides practitioners and their staff with the tools, training, and advice they need to succeed and build thriving accounting firms.
- (What We Do) Our knowledgeable team provides compliance, training and technical advice to CPA firms that are looking to excel. From file monitoring and audit planning to in-house professional development courses, staff training and customized consulting solutions, our team exists to serve the needs of public practice firms both large and small.
- (How We Do It) Our collaborative, integrated approach means clients have access to and support from people who know public practice inside and out.



Logo

Your logo is one part of the visual representation of your brand. Proper and consistent use of a logo will help people identify and notice your company. It also helps set you apart from your competitors.

Tip: Clearly define how your logo should and should not be used and stick to these guidelines. For example, can your logo be placed on an image or should it only be placed on a white or black background? Can the colours in your logo be changed or should they always remain true to the original colours? Defining these standards will help ensure your logo is properly used and remains an easily-identifiable mark of your company.

Use of CPA Logo in BC

Only firms registered for public practice are permitted to use the CPA logo in their branding. Registration of your firm is not sufficient to be eligible to use the CPA logo. Rather, you must complete and submit the CPA & Design Mark Agreement application on the CPABC website. There are many rules and guidelines associated with using and reproducing the CPA logo so ensure that you have familiarized yourself with these before spending time and resources on letterhead, advertisements and signage.



BC Transitional Guidance: Signage

As part of the CPA transition process CPABC has set December 31, 2017 as the deadline for firms to transition their signage to comply with the descriptive style and CPA logo guidance. The deadlines have already elapsed for transition of legacy business cards and letterhead (December 31, 2015) as well as legacy references on websites (June 30, 2016) so if you have not done so already you should make these changes ASAP.



Brand Colours

Brand colours are a set of colours that are always used in visual representations of your brand, no matter the platform or material. Choosing and using colours that fit your brand helps to reinforce a unified brand identity and differentiate you from other accounting firms.

Tip: Select and capture the colour codes (RGB, CMYK and Pantone) for your brand colours. Then ensure they are always used in any digital or print materials. People will start to identify you with your brand colours. There's a big difference between Tiffany blue and the blue used by Pepsi.

Brand Voice

Brand voice helps bring your company's character, personality and values to life. Establishing a brand voice helps you attract the right clients and employees to your company. Do you want to be seen as professional? Quirky? Fun? Approachable? Trustworthy? Reliable? Your brand voice should reflect the attributes you want to represent while being mindful that it is also reflective of the CPA brand itself. Clients will want to engage with a company whose identity resonates with their own needs, values and the way they want to be served. Brand voice plays a big role in getting this across.

Tip: Think about your firm's culture, personality and how you want to be perceived. This should help you define your brand voice.

A Note on Employer Branding

In addition to attracting and retaining clients and business partners, your brand also plays a role in attracting and retaining employees. Your brand has the potential to show job seekers that your firm has the values, personality and culture of a company they want to work for. Consider these tips when thinking about employer branding:

- **Website** – often the first point of contact for job seekers, your website should clearly showcase what your company is about and what you believe in. If you know you are hiring or will be, your website should also include a section for job seekers with content that highlights company culture and job descriptions.
- **Job Descriptions** – job descriptions are one way to “hook” potential employees by demonstrating what it's like to work at your firm and how a job seeker can make an impact in your company. Forget dull lists of responsibilities and requirements, think of job descriptions as your opportunity to “pitch” top talent on why they need to work at your firm, how they can contribute to your workplace and what they will gain from the experience.
- **Social Media** – we'll explore social media more in part two of this series, but it's important to note that social media can be harnessed to attract top talent. Sharing company events, good news stories and photos that capture your team at work and at play give people a glimpse into what it could be like to work with you.

How Clearline Consulting and Six Words Can Help

There are a number of things you can do to improve the branding efforts of your accounting firm. Here are some places to start and ways we can help:

- Develop and use a styleguide or brand guidelines document to capture your brand standards. This document should clearly articulate how your logo should be used, your preferred font and colours and key attributes of your brand voice.
- Conduct a review of all marketing materials both online and print-based to ensure they are on-brand and compliant with the professions requirements. Make updates where required.
- Develop an employer brand strategy that helps your firm attract and retain top talent.

Summary

Making time to think strategically about your branding, marketing and communications efforts can help set your firm up for success. In a competitive market, an effective brand and marketing communications strategy can mean the difference between a potential client or employee choosing your firm, or someone else's.



About Us

Clearline Consulting

Clearline Consulting provides practitioners and their staff with the tools, training and advice they need to succeed and build thriving accounting firms. From compliance, file monitoring and audit planning to professional development courses, staff training and customized consulting solutions, our team exists to serve the needs of small to mid-sized public practice firms. Our collaborative, integrated approach means clients have access to and support from knowledgeable people who are in front of the ever-changing standards environment.

Bridget Noonan, CPA, CA – Director



Bridget is a director at Clearline Consulting and also a CPA professional development instructor and consultant to CPABC and CPA Canada. She has over 15 years of experience in public practice with a mid-size firm in Vancouver and as a professional standards advisor with CPABC. Bridget applies her experience to empowering CPA firms and practitioners with technical competencies, professional development, regulatory compliance, and practice management matters.

Tom Gillespie, CPA, CA – Director



Tom has over ten years of dedicated accounting and assurance experience having worked with several public practice firms and as the associate director of practice review with CPABC. Tom provides file monitoring, training, audit/assurance planning and on-going consulting services to CPA firms and practitioners, easing their workload and facilitating their success. In addition to his role at Clearline Consulting, Tom instructs professional development courses with CPABC and also serves as a consultant and advisor to CPABC and CPA Canada.

Six Words Communication Corp.

Six Words Communication Corp. is a communications and content marketing firm serving businesses and not-for-profits across Canada. Everything we do at Six Words strives to capture the power of thoughtful, crisp communication. By being direct, clear and creative, we're able to help companies cut through the noise to connect with their audiences and reach their goals. From change management communication, to content strategies, to social media marketing – we apply our communication philosophy and approach to all areas of our work.

Corinne Impey, Founder, Director of Creative & Communications



Founder of Six Words Communication Corp., Corinne is a versatile, action-oriented communication specialist. She has worked with accounting firms, large corporations and non-profits to solve communication challenges, build brands and drive business results. Corinne holds a journalism degree from Carleton University and a Masters of Professional Communication degree from Ryerson University. In 2015, Corinne received a Gold Quill Excellence Award from the International Association of Business Communicators for her work in change communication.