

# Get your light from under a bushel and sell your firm

by Colin Dunn

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*The greatest thing about perception is you can create it. By adapting three strategies, Colin Dunn outlines how you can create a very different perception in your own firm – ones that helped attract great people in the UK firm in which he worked, and which have been replicated with other firms with whom he has consulted since.*

## **I heard it again on Monday! “Why would anyone want to work for our firm?”**

I’ve written about the self-esteem problem in the professions before and this is a classic example. The partner who uttered these words runs a boutique accounting business in a great suburban location; no rush hour to contend with, plenty of parking, great working environment. The firm works with a small number of high value clients and gets involved in a host of interesting projects helping those clients. It’s the basis of a great story to sell to prospective team members – and yet, “why would anyone want to work for us?”

If you believe that, then of course it will be true. Not a week goes by without someone telling me how hard it is to find good people. Last month I offered [pragmatic suggestions on how to retain and develop your best people](#) once you have them. In this

article I will reflect on some simple, yet rarely implemented strategy that helped us attract great people back the firm I worked with in the UK and which have been replicated with other firms with whom I have consulted since.



## **Strategy #1: Articulate how your prospective team member will be better off when they join you**

I was interviewed by the Keith Seeley, the Managing Partner of the firm I joined. I remember just two things about the interview. One was that it lasted no more than 20 minutes; the second was the way in which Keith very eloquently articulated why I should join his growing firm:

“You have two choices. You can either join Price Waterhouse and spend three years ticking with a green pen. Or you can join us and if you’re any good, you’ll have direct client contact within six months.” I was sold on the firm at that point.

If someone asks you what makes your firm a great place to work, what is your response? You need to have a pithy answer that you and your team can convey whenever it is needed. Some examples:

- “We are the fastest growing firm in our region so there is enormous opportunity for great people to progress very quickly.”
- “We are acknowledged experts in the pharmacy industry so you have a genuine opportunity to develop some niche industry knowledge.”
- “Our best clients engage us to help them grow their businesses. We love that sort of work and we do it better than any firm I know.”
- “We asked our team members that very question just recently and the top three things they said they found stimulating about working at our firm were...”

Start with bullet point four above if you do not currently have an equivalent to one, two or three. (If they say ‘nothing’, you have a bigger problem!)

### **Strategy #2: Involve your best team members in the hiring process**

When Keith had finished his meeting with me, he looked me in the eye and said, “Now I am going to introduce you to two of my best team members who will tell you what it is like to work here.” And with that, I was whisked away to a conference room where I was met by Sally, a manager, and Chris, who had joined the firm 12 months prior. They spoke for five minutes each about their story with the firm and it was abundantly clear that they were having a lot of fun. They then answered my questions confidently and candidly.

Too few firms involve their people in the hiring process. Yet no-one will sell your firm as well as happy team members. Potential new hires know that these are the people they will be interacting with on a daily basis so if they are clearly engaged and enthused it is very impactful.

Sally and Chris left me with a very professionally produced brochure containing case studies of team members (some of whom had left and gone on to great things, others who had clearly had a very successful path to the higher echelons of the firm) and testimonials from lots of smiling faces. I have written often about obtaining case studies and testimonials from clients to substantiate what you say about your service offerings. The same stands for the recruitment process. The message was very clear – join our firm and you’ll have a great opportunity to succeed...and it is OK if that success is ultimately outside the firm as long as we help you succeed. Don’t be paranoid that people might leave your firm. Instead, do whatever you can to help them become hugely successful and your firm and your people will grow exponentially.

### **Strategy #3: Be a fervent believer in the truism ‘success breeds success’**

Recently one of my very best clients admitted to twinges of guilt when mentioning to his clients that he was attending a conference in Hawai’i. You see, the self esteem monster can attack the best of



us! He is over that now and is enjoying explaining to those same clients how important it was that he invests time in his own personal development so that he could better help them with theirs.

Back to the UK firm I worked with. In 1990 we moved from two terraced houses and a porta-cabin into a custom built four storey building in the centre of town. The new office was beautifully appointed with original art on the walls, a purpose built boardroom (which was in constant use for client functions and meetings) and the enticing aroma of freshly brewed coffee in the reception.

Out the back of the office we had car parking for 40 cars. The partners' cars were parked right by the front door, a row of BMWs, Mercedes and Porsches. A group of team members strongly opposed this, suggesting that clients should be given preferential parking closest to the building. The partners, rightly in my view, opposed this suggestion. They took the view that clients wanted to be associated with success and as such, they were proud of their cars and their new office.

It amazed me at the time how quickly after we moved into the new office we started to attract a very different sort of client without doing anything different from a marketing perspective. And what also became apparent was that we were attracting a very different calibre of team member. New partners and managers jumped ship from Big Four firms to be a part of this revolution (incidentally, those who have hung on for the ride are now directors and shareholders in the UK's seventh largest accounting firm, [Tenon](#), who acquired the firm in 2001).

The greatest thing about perception is you can create it. By adapting the three strategies I have outlined in this article, you can create a very different perception in your own firm. Just be careful that you can live up to the image you are putting forward. It is dangerous to promise client contact, for example, if you do not intend to offer it. So find points of difference that work for you, then get your light from under your bushel and sell your firm – both to clients and prospective team members. What's the worst that could happen?

#### **About the author**

*Colin Dunn is the Principal of ReNew Group Pty Ltd. ReNew Group provides consulting services to professional services firms. Colin's passion is to help professionals achieve balance between optimal earnings and desired lifestyle. Colin started his career with one of the fastest growing accounting firms in the United Kingdom, working in audit, corporate finance and business development. In 1996 he joined Results Accountants' Systems (later RAN ONE) where he played a pivotal role in content creation and product development, before running the European operations and subsequently the Australian operations. He co-founded ReNew Group in 2004. For more information, please visit [www.renewgroup.com.au](http://www.renewgroup.com.au) or email [colin.dunn@renewgroup.com.au](mailto:colin.dunn@renewgroup.com.au).*