

Your Firm Is Walking the Walk on Diversity, But Are Your Leaders Talking the Talk?

by Debra Pickett



When it comes to getting the word out about their firm's gender diversity, many marketing directors focus on publicizing stats that demonstrate progress. Using external communications to spotlight an evenly split associate class, a new equity partner who is a woman or the contributions of women attorneys on marquee cases is a great way to promote your firm's commitment to gender equality.

But statistics are only one piece of the story about how your firm supports its women lawyers. And that full story may already be on display for prospective clients and recruits, whether you realize it or not. Your overall messaging comes across not just in the communications you produce — on your website, on social media, in ads and thought leadership pieces — but also in who speaks for your firm in the media and what they say. There's nothing worse than launching an ambitious information campaign to modernize your firm's image, only to have it undermined by comments to a reporter that are way off message.

Let's look at two hypothetical cases of law firm leaders quoted in a legal media story on the lack of women represented in banking and finance law.

Law leader A describes his firm's talent-driven effort to bring in the best women attorneys as well as a robust mentoring and sponsorship program focused on advancing them to leadership positions. "It's important to us to promote top women attorneys," he says. "But inclusion isn't something the firm is embracing out of social correctness or benevolence. Instead, we know, and research shows, that **more diverse teams of lawyers are better problem solvers**, which means they provide better service to clients. More women in leadership is good for the firm and good for our clients."

Law leader B talks about his firm's efforts in a different way. He notes that he's pretty sure the firm won the business on a \$30 billion deal because they included a woman on the team at the pitch meeting, though he doesn't say whether that woman will play a significant role on the work itself. On the matter of advancing women attorneys in this practice area, he says, "**We're trying, but this job is just inherently demanding and unpredictable, and it's tough for someone with childcare responsibilities to fully participate.**"

Leader A's comments underscore the marketing department's work to get the word out about the progress the firm is making on gender diversity. He skillfully articulates not just what the firm is doing but why, and how these initiatives will ultimately benefit clients. Leader B's comments, however, will make most marketing directors break into a sweat. He talks about diversity as a legal obligation but also a burden on the firm. And while he seems genuinely to believe that a lack of women in power is a loss for those women, he does not articulate an understanding that the firm and its clients are worse off without the unique contributions those women attorneys would make to the work. Comments like these to a reporter are off message and undermine the firm's overall goal to demonstrate that it is willing to change things like work processes and schedules to prioritize gender diversity.

Marketing directors don't always have control over who takes a reporter's call or what that person chooses to say. But as much as possible, marketers must take proactive steps to harness the power of these media opportunities and make sure they work in service of the firm's overall communications strategy. Here are three ways you can start this work today:

Integrate messaging across internal and external communications. Has your firm articulated how its gender-equality initiatives line up with its stated values or mission statement? Your internal communications are the place to begin distributing those talking points. All members of the firm should understand not just what you are doing to support the advancement of women but why, and how the initiatives serve clients. This messaging should be consistent across your internal and external outreach.

Advocate for media training. High-quality media training will prepare your firm's leaders to speak knowledgeably about the firm's diversity initiatives and stay on message. It will also help to create a plan for which leaders should speak on which topics to maximize credibility.

Broker relationships between key reporters and select attorneys. You can influence who becomes the face of the firm in the media by taking proactive steps to match reporters with your best spokespeople and steering them away from less reliable partners. To maximize the effectiveness of these introductions, prepare both parties for the conversation: help your firm representative understand the reporter's specific interests, and provide the reporter with background on the attorney's expertise and roles within the firm. Don't leave anything to chance.

Your efforts to promote your firm's diversity initiatives will only be successful if your messaging is consistent across all channels. Get proactive to ensure that your firm's media opportunities support your communication strategy and build the firm's brand overall.

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