

Media Education Is Crucial to Preparing Young Attorneys to Speak on the Record

by Debra Pickett

Last month, a photojournalist for The Daily Northwestern, Northwestern University's campus newspaper, captured photographs of student protestors who rushed a lecture hall where former Attorney General Jeff Sessions was speaking on campus. One of the pictures the photojournalist published featured a protestor sprawled on the floor. Students involved in the protest reacted with sharp criticism: being photographed in public had caused the protestor trauma, they argued. In addition, the reporters who used the student directory to attempt to contact protestors for quotes had invaded those students' privacy.

In response to this pressure, editors at the newspaper took the photographs down and published an apology — steps that were immediately scorned by seasoned media professionals who explained that reporting on public events, through gathering quotes and taking pictures, is one of the most basic functions of journalism.

As with many stories that go viral, overheated Twitter commentary led to cross-generation attacks, straw-man arguments and handwringing over the death of traditional media. But when you push aside the noise around this story, it becomes clear that what happened at Northwestern illuminates an interesting disconnect between young people on the cusp of the Millennial-Z generations and the rest of us: we have different ideas about the purpose and function of traditional media.

What does this have to do with legal marketing? The oldest members of Generation Z are preparing to enter law school in the fall of 2020, which means firms are just a few years out from welcoming this new crop of lawyers. Forward-thinking law firms have long understood the value of media training in helping their attorneys build fruitful relationships with reporters and manage individual and firm brands across multiple channels. The Northwestern case, however, demonstrates that firms must also be prepared to offer some basic media education to their business development curriculum.

Younger lawyers may have a steep learning curve if they want to launch their careers with a productive media strategy. Here are three lessons firms will need to figure out how to teach them:

It's hard to understand what you don't consume. As social media has become such a central part of the way we broadcast and receive information, it fills the role traditional media used to play in some people's lives. Not only does this mean that fewer people are reading the newspaper and relying on quality objective journalism to understand the world, but that inexperience with traditional media also breeds ignorance about what reporters, including specialists in the legal media, do all day and why they do it.

A young attorney who does not read the most important media outlets in the legal industry may not have a proper understanding of how law leaders use the information and data reporters publish to make business decisions and innovate at the practice and firm level. While managing partners may not always be pleased with the coverage of their firm, they understand and accept that the health of the industry relies on these sources of objective information. What's more, for every article that makes a law partner squirm, there is one that amplifies a firm's accomplishments for the entire industry to see.

Those media mentions are worth their weight in gold, but you have to respect and understand the institution of legal journalism as a whole to ever have a chance at winning one for yourself or your firm.

Not all media is the same. The media landscape of 2019 exists across four categories: paid, owned, shared, and earned. Paid media is sponsored content and pay-to-play awards and features. Owned media is the content your firm creates and distributes through your website and newsletter. Shared media is social media and all the content it spreads so rapidly. And earned media encompasses mentions in traditional media outlets.

A sophisticated communications strategy creates a plan for all four categories and, importantly, recognizes the strengths and weaknesses of each one. The first step to making sense of it all is to recognize the tension between control and authority. Media that allows your firm complete control over the content — your Twitter feed, for example — does not carry much authority. Consumers understand that anyone can make any claim they like on the internet. Media outlets that carry authority in the industry — such as Bloomberg Law or the Wall Street Journal — are not going to offer you much control over the content. Their independence is what gives them authority.

Attorneys who are too focused on controlling the message will miss out on the chance to see their work featured in an outlet that prospective clients and recruits actually trust.

Your right to privacy is not unlimited in scope. While individuals of course have the right to live their private lives free from interference, attorneys engaged in work on behalf of law firms and companies, which in many cases involves actions that are matters of public record, should expect to occasionally face questions about that work. Fearing these encounters or, worse, painting this healthy professional interaction as some kind of victimization, is bad for both the legal industry and an attorney's own career development. Attorneys who understand the role traditional media plays in their business development make themselves available to reporters and are ready to speak off the cuff about their cases, clients and the broader context of legal questions they spend time on.

Savvy lawyers have confidence that their integrity and expertise will stand up to scrutiny by a reporter, and they extend professional courtesy to journalists doing the hard work of chronicling a complex and dynamic industry.

As the media landscape continues to evolve, marketers and firm leaders will have to work harder than ever to play in all four media categories — paid, owned, shared and earned — and prepare their attorneys to build productive relationships with the reporters who can help them reach their desired audience.

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