

How Millennial Lawyers Are Pushing Firms to Rethink the Role of PR and Messaging

by Debra Pickett



Law firm management experts and industry watchers have spilled a lot of ink in the past decade about how millennial lawyers are different from the generations of lawyers who came before. The millennial perspective has shone a light on aspects of the job that older lawyers assumed could never change — the inflexible schedule, the grueling and lonely path to advancement, the lack of diversity that seemed baked in to the law firm model — and the industry has begun to change.

And while nurturing strong client relationships and providing excellent service used to be the only marketing plan a law firm needed, the values — like equity, transparency and authenticity — of millennial lawyers are one of the major pressures now forcing firms to rethink the role of PR and messaging.

Forward-thinking firms are responding to this call for change by tackling some big questions:

What's our firm's story?

Prospective clients and recruits respond to a compelling narrative that communicates your firm's identity to the market. And that story must be built on the needs of the client rather than the needs of the firm, as the typical firm's story was (even if by default) in decades past.

Crafting that story requires developing a deep understanding of what clients care about. What keeps them up at night? What challenges will they be facing a year from now that haven't yet occurred to them? How can the particular skills and expertise of your attorneys serve these needs? And, most importantly, how can you make that case to the client? Armed with this deep knowledge of what their clients want and need, firm leaders can then harness the power of all available channels of communication to tell the story of what makes them different, and spotlight what they have to offer.

Who is our website for?

The role of websites has changed. A decade or two ago, many established firms embraced the need to simply have a website, assigned the work of maintaining it to the marketing and IT departments, and continue to spend a fortune keeping it up to date. Unfortunately, too many firms operate on automatic pilot when it comes to thinking about who visits their website and how they use it.

Modern law firm websites are not really marketing tools. They don't "sell" the firm because the chance that the website is the primary entry point for a new client is pretty low. Instead, firm websites are communication tools, and the audience is not clients but potential recruits and laterals, opposing counsel or co-counsel, and judges and clerks. Understanding that a website is not a selling tool but a way to share information about your firm should shift your approach to the content. Your website should showcase key aspects of your firm. In addition to well-written biographies of your attorneys that feature their backgrounds and areas of expertise, the website is also the place to highlight important aspects of your firm's culture and focus on team members of diverse backgrounds.

Who should speak for our firm?

You think strategically about the partners best positioned to respond to client proposals, and you should give the same consideration to whose names you'd like to see in the legal media representing your firm. Good PR should raise the profile of particular lawyers for strategic reasons and leave nothing to chance. When a reporter calls to ask about your new parental leave program, who should answer those questions, and why? Who could credibly write a thought leadership piece on the importance of sponsorship and mentoring? What about a column on a new tax incentive clients should consider taking advantage of?

The story of your firm — your culture and who you aspire to be — is shaped by which attorneys are telling it. Your top billers and client wranglers are not necessarily the same folks who should be the voice of your firm in communications. Firms must define and assign these important roles.

Is our messaging consistent?

You worked hard to develop an outward-facing message that would attract and recruit new attorneys and lateral hires. But now that they've joined your firm, does your internal messaging match what they saw when they were on the job market? In many firms, human resources handles internal communications. While this department may be doing a fine job distributing important information to your employees, retention and integration of millennial lawyers depends on continuing to communicate your firm's values and goals in authentic ways. Employee communication should reflect the strategic vision of the firm's top leadership.

An internal newsletter, for example, should be about much more than just upcoming office events and changes to your benefit plans. It should celebrate staff promotions (linking the work employees do to the greater firm mission), positive results for clients and recent business development wins. It's also the place to feature diverse members of the firm, promote mental health initiatives, showcase a male partner taking parental leave, link to professional development and nontraditional networking opportunities inside and outside the firm, and more.

Attracting and retaining millennial recruits, and understanding how to serve millennial clients, are two of the biggest challenges today's law firms face. But this is also an exciting opportunity. When you understand what this cohort values and communicate those values via the same kind of high-production, well-packaged content that millennials expect in all areas of their media-rich lives, your firm will be well positioned to meet the challenges of this current moment.

This [article](#) originally appeared in the National Law Review on January 21, 2020.