

Three Messages Next-Generation Recruits Need to Hear from Law Firms

by Debra Pickett



By sheer numbers, millennials make up the largest generational group at midsize and large law firms today. Within the past few years, the oldest members of that generation began reaching partnership, and soon they will take over leadership positions as well. But the transition hasn't been easy. Law firms know they must adapt in big ways to recruit, motivate and retain these lawyers, while at the same time working to stay relevant to firm clients. After all, the majority of legal services buyers will soon be millennials too.

Firms understand what matters to these younger lawyers; meaningful work, equity and inclusion, and work-life balance are all factors that determine where they choose to build their careers. Most firms are at least beginning to reimagine some of the ways they do business in order to accommodate the needs of this new generation of lawyers. But not all law leaders grasp the important role communication strategy should play in their efforts to modernize. You might be taking the right steps, but how are you talking about that work with your target audience?

Here are three messages your firm must express:

"We have a plan to make our firm more diverse and inclusive."

Millennial lawyers know that most firms have been talking about diversity and inclusion for years without making much progress on advancing women, people of color, LGBT lawyers and lawyers with disabilities. They want to work for a firm that goes beyond lip service to articulate a plan of action and ambitious benchmarks that will hold leadership accountable for leaving the country club culture behind. What does that look like?

- **Provide PR support for diverse attorneys to help them build their profiles and develop business.** Deploy your communications resources strategically to shine a light on your firm's future superstars.
- **Address pay equity and the need for change.** Millennials value authenticity, and they interpret silence on issues like this as complicity with unfair practices.
- **Demystify networking.** Business development training and participation in professional associations can help these lawyers build their business in ways that feel natural and effective.
- **Equalize access and opportunity.** How do cases and matters get staffed at your firm? Do you have a method for fairly distributing work and making sure a wide swath of your attorneys get to take a crack at high-profile work?

“We want you to have a life outside work — really.”

Millennials are more skeptical of institutions than past generations, and that means they are pretty good at spotting empty promises. So in order to appeal to these lawyers, your firm will have to get beyond platitudes and commit to specific policies and initiatives that encourage and protect work-life balance. How can you convince them you mean it?

- **Embrace flexible scheduling.** Firms that will not budge on schedules virtually guarantee that parents — and women more often than men — will be forced to make impossible choices between their children and their career.
- **Destigmatize parental leave.** Men and women both risk being viewed as “out of the loop” or not sufficiently committed to the firm if they choose to take time off after their babies are born, and that can have real negative consequences for their careers. Hold up and celebrate cases of men in leadership who take parental leave. Make it the new norm.
- **Address mental health issues head on.** By now we’re all familiar with the alarmingly high incidence of depression, substance abuse and suicide among attorneys. Millennial lawyers want to know firms are not sticking their heads in the sand when it comes to mental health.

“We want you to succeed.”

Enduring and succeeding in the survival-of-the-fittest law firm culture may have been a badge of honor for generations past, but not for millennial lawyers. This cohort values collaboration and fairness more than gaining a competitive edge on their peers, and forward-thinking firms will adopt new policies and practices that assure millennial lawyers the game is not rigged. How can you communicate your support to these associates and younger partners?

- **Make your billable hour expectations transparent.** According to the Young Lawyer Editorial Board of the American Lawyer, associates just want their new firms to be straight with them about how many hours they are expected to bill. And they don’t mean the published hours requirement.
- **Take mentorship seriously and prepare young lawyers to take advantage of it.** Mentorship programs succeed when firms devote time and resources to them, and when they make thoughtful decisions about which partners should participate. (Not everyone is cut out to be a mentor, and that’s okay.)
- **Consider a sponsorship model.** Sponsors move beyond the traditional mentoring engagement to advocate for their protégé. This may mean expanding the perception of the kind of work the lawyer can take on, brokering connections with other partners or with clients, or advocating when it comes time to staff cases. A sponsor uses his or her power and access to ease the younger lawyer’s advancement, particularly if that younger lawyer is a woman or other minority in the firm.

Firms who get their messaging right — and implement policies and processes that back those messages up — will be well positioned to recruit the best and brightest next-generation lawyers.

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