How to Differentiate Your Law Firm

Written by Teresa Matich

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In today's client-centered age, it's more important than ever that your law firm stands out from the crowd. But how do you differentiate yourself from the competition when you're all providing very similar legal deliverables?

We spoke to Shreya Ley of LayRoots about this very issue at ClioCon 2019. Shreya is the co-founder of LayRoots, along with her husband, Colin Ley. The firm provides asset protection services, and differentiates itself by adding a human element to its brand.

Teresa Matich:

Why do you think it's important for law firms to differentiate themselves?

Shreya Ley:

I think there's a lot of fear-mongering with robot technology and AI, but also just a changing consumer landscape where law is often seen as becoming more and more commoditized. So it becomes increasingly more difficult for someone to say, "Well, what's the difference between this LegalZoom LLC versus hiring an attorney?" Or, "What's the difference even between litigator A and litigator B?" And I think that what it comes down to is personality fit and preferences amongst the consumers.

And it's oftentimes just a matter of being able to get out there and tell your story too, so that people know whether they will like you or not. And I think Jack Newton mentioned that in his keynote as well: that one of the main criteria is to just be likable.

Teresa Matich:

Absolutely. And so how do you do that? How do you stand out from all the noise on the internet at LayRoots?

Shreya Ley:

I think a lot of it for us is just us being ourselves. We are also more specific. We've become more and more specific in our messaging as to who it is that we're speaking to. So I think that helps. I think Seth Godin, who I absolutely love, said something along the lines of, 'Well it's really difficult to be in the top 10% of some really broad category or the top 10 or five.

But it's really easy if you make it like a much smaller, more specific category.' So that is kind of our goal: We don't need to be the law firm for everybody. We're just the law firm for the people who need our service. Typically it's partners in life and business who are worried about lawsuits. And so that is who we're speaking to. That helps us break through the noise because it's a specific audience.

But also just being ourselves I think helps differentiate us too. We're not all dressed in gray suits and we don't have the scales of justice on our website. We don't have all of the things that people typically associate with a lawyer website or a lawyer online persona.

Teresa Matich:

You also talk about being a lawyer-human—what do you mean by that?

Shreya Ley:

Yes, so it started out as a joke actually, when we first started the law firm. We were making business cards and we didn't know what to put as our title on the business card, because it seemed so stuffy and also incorrect to be like "partner" or "managing partner" or "director," or whatever it was. It was just the two of us. But we had to have these business cards for our conference. So we just threw "lawyer-human" on there and went to the conference. And, during the conference, people kept bringing others up to us and being like, "These are the people I told you about. They're the lawyer-humans." And so we ran with it.

But for us it really just means that we're human beings and we're not afraid of showing our human side. But also we know and understand that our clients are humans as well, and we want to treat them like human beings and not just like a billable hour, or a case number, or a stack of documents.

Teresa Matich:

That makes sense! You also talk about how your goal behind that is to help clients live more carefree lives.

Shreya Ley:

Yes.

Teresa Matich:

So what do you mean by that?

Shreya Ley:

Well, when something goes wrong—or even if something hasn't necessarily gone wrong but you just don't know what you don't know—that worry kind of hangs over you and you get afraid to do things in your life, right?

For example, if you're worried about your health insurance—specifically if you don't know if you have a gap in your health insurance—you might not go out snowboarding, or you might not go on that fishing trip or do these activities that you might really enjoy doing because you're worried about what might happen if something goes wrong. And so for us, we know that people oftentimes don't know about what legal holes they might have. And they might be worried about it on the estate planning or asset protection side of things. And so they might be worried about going on that trip with their family or doing something risky that they might really enjoy because they're worried about what might happen to their family and loved ones should something happen to them. And the same goes on the asset protection side with things like lawsuits.

It's having that worry of like, well, did I set up that entity correctly for my investments? Because if I get sued it will completely wipe me out and my family won't have money to pay the bills and we'll have to move, and all of those things. So we help them make sure that their legal stuff is taken care of, so that they can live more carefree lives.

Teresa Matich:

Very cool. And getting back to the differentiation piece of this, customers also describe your service as one of a kind. So why do you think that they describe it that way?

Shreya Ley:

I am not sure, but I think it's mostly just because again, it comes down to personality, and there aren't a ton of people providing these sorts of asset protection services to this group of folks who are in the growth phase of their life.

In our talk we spoke about how, when we were looking for asset protection services for ourselves, people would tell us, "Well come back when you have $30 million and can spend $50,000 on a trust." But there were things that we could have been doing at that stage in our life and can do at this stage in our life that people just weren't providing because they didn't find it monetarily advantageous for them. Or they wanted to provide the Cadillac of services instead of the Subaru. And we are filling that gap a little bit. So that might be part of it.

But I think, honestly, it's just also that we care and we *show* that we care about our clients. We're not out there just to bill them. I think a lot of people have that fear that they're going to talk to an attorney and the attorney asks them about their spouse or their kids and then

they're going to receive a bill in the mail for 80 bucks or something.

Our clients don't have to worry about that because we do things on a flat-fee basis, and so we're asking because we care about it—not because it adds to our bottom line.

Teresa Matich:

It seems like client service is a really important part of what you do.

Shreya Ley:

It is, yes. It's a big part of it. I think it's a view on the long term also, rather than the short term. We want people to be happy with our services. That's what we enjoy when we buy from brands or people: that client service aspect of it. I think it's a big differentiator of why we would choose one hotel over another or one company over another. And it's always been something that I value in the brands I purchase from. So I want that to be in the business I create also.

Teresa Matich:

Makes sense. So what advice would you give to law firms who want to differentiate themselves?

Shreya Ley:

I would say, number one, to not be afraid. Don't be afraid to try different things. Ten years from now, five years from now, you're still going to be a law firm. But the marketing campaign you run now, people aren't necessarily going to remember that five years from now. So you can try something and if it doesn't work you can change, and that's okay.

But also, don't be afraid to be yourself. I think when we come out of law school, there's this idea that in order to be a professional and in order to provide this unbiased kind of facade that we have to be in a suit and not have a personality—or at least hide our personalities—when speaking to clients. Because otherwise they'll think of us as unprofessional. And I don't think that's the case anymore. I think people are changing and expectations are changing.

Teresa Matich:

Absolutely. And is there anything you do yourself in terms of your marketing in particular?

Shreya Ley:

Well, we do all of our marketing ourselves, and we do a lot of videos because we're comfortable on video. So we like that medium. We mix up some personal stories with legal questions that we get. And we specifically right now are using Facebook and YouTube. But for most people I would say, just choose the medium you're comfortable with and go with that. Because you'll find people on whatever platform you use. It doesn't really matter.

Teresa Matich:

Yes, that makes a lot of sense. So you've created a good work-life balance with your firm. You're adventurous, you like to go out and do lots of fun stuff as well as being a lawyer. So why is that important to you?

Shreya Ley:

Well, I think it helps me to be a better lawyer. It helps to not be burnt out and to have interests outside of just my business and my clients, because I'll come back to whatever work it is refreshed.

But also, why would I create a business if I'm going to not be able to do the things that I like to do? I might as well just work for somebody else and clock in 50- or 60-hour work weeks working for big law, get my paycheck, and go home. I mean, if it was just about the money and not about my life as well, then what's the point of building something, I guess?

Teresa Matich:

Yes. So how do you find that balance?

Shreya Ley:

It was hard at first. We definitely didn't start out that way. When you're in the first parts of building a business, it's a lot of work. So we didn't really have that for a long time and we started building that in. There isn't really a distinction between our work and our personal time. We don't set hard-and-fast rules.

Sometimes it's really important for us to work out. So we'll go to a yoga class, or I'll go to a yoga class, and then afterwards, later that night after dinner, I'll open up my laptop and answer client emails. So it's about deciding what's important and scheduling time for it. And sometimes that doesn't happen because work gets in the way, but more often than not it works out.

Teresa Matich:

That's great. I wanted to also ask you about how you value your services. You're trying to provide something different to clients and fill a gap, but there's also a testimonial on your site that says they would have paid double for your services?

Shreya Ley:

Yes. That's the goal. You want people to feel that way. You want people to feel like they would pay more for what they're receiving and that they got a great deal, regardless of what that price is.

For us, it changes. We test different price points and try to figure out what is the point where we feel adequately compensated for the amount of time that goes into it and the expertise that we're bringing to the table. But we don't want to price ourselves so high that everybody is saying no. We also look at how many clients we can sustainably serve per attorney per year while still having that time for outdoor adventures and taking a vacation and things like that. We don't want anyone to ever feel like they're overworked. They need to have that balance. And so how do we make sure that people are going to get enough compensation for the number of clients? So we look at it from both sides—from the customer side and then internally also at what makes sense. Do we get to make what we need to make and work the number of hours we want to work?

Teresa Matich:

Yes, that seems very logical. It's like you're balancing what you need to make and value yourself with the needs of the client as well.

Shreya Ley:

Yes, definitely. And what we've also discovered is that there are a lot of things you can do that have nothing to do with the law that you can add in that make people feel good and like they're receiving something special. But they don't necessarily need a lawyer to do that or to provide that service. When we create a trust for someone and people want to know how to put stuff into their trust, the majority of the questions we're going to get are "How do I title things?" or "Where is my document?"

A lawyer doesn't need to be there to answer those questions. Anyone can answer those questions who has access to the information. And so to build all those things into our packages, it makes people feel more at ease. But it also is sustainable for us to grow in our practice, because we don't necessarily need to add a million lawyers to do that. We could work with anybody and they don't even necessarily need to be in the office with us. They could be anywhere.

Teresa Matich:

That's really cool. What would you say to a lawyer who is hearing all of this and wants to differentiate themselves, but they're not sure where to begin? How would you encourage someone like that?

Shreya Ley:

Yes, I mean we tried a lot of things. We did a podcast. We did blog posts. We went on a vision quest. We hired the Rosen Institute to help us, and we're not sponsored by them or anything, but it just really helped us. And there are things people can do on their own.

I would say the biggest thing is to be really honest with yourself about what you're interested in. And be honest about what you are willing to do and what you are not willing to do. Because I think that was the biggest issue for us: At first we weren't really honest with ourselves about what interested us and who we were.

And then just start talking about your differentiator, and talk about it to whoever will listen. You can talk about it on a blog post. You can talk about it in videos. You can talk about it on a podcast. You can just have coffees with people. It doesn't really matter where or how you start: Just get started.

Teresa Matich:

Yes, and it sounds like, further to what you're saying before, you don't need to have a super niche law practice or anything. There are things you can do that are not necessarily tied to the practice of law, but are maybe more tied to the experience you're providing that differentiate you?

Shreya Ley:

Yes, I mean this was a huge issue for me. Colin would get mad at me all the time because he kept saying, "Oh you're not picking a niche. You are not picking a niche." And I thought "I don't really care what type of law I practice that much. It's not that important to me." I was more interested in the business of the law firm. And it was when I realized that you could pick more of a psychographic profile than a niche practice area that I found what I wanted. I wanted to help a certain type of person, and that's what I was passionate about. Not that I want to do this specific type of law. And other people may be completely different. They may be in love with criminal defense or something and they can focus on that instead, but it doesn't necessarily have to be, "Oh, I picked this specific area of law." It might be closer to "I want to help this specific type of person."

Teresa Matich:

That sounds really cool. Thank you so much. Is there anything else you wanted to add?

Shreya Ley:

If anyone has questions or wants to talk about marketing or business of law stuff, they're always welcome to reach out to me.

Teresa Matich:

Thank you so much for joining me

Shreya Ley:

Thanks.

About Clio

Clio is the global leader in legal AI, powering legal work across the profession, from law firms of every size to corporate legal teams, government agencies, and courts. Its Intelligent Legal Work Platform unites the business and practice of law, connecting the people, information, and processes behind legal work. Clio's AI brings the context together with legal sources drawn from Clio Library, a growing collection of more than one billion legal documents. Over 400,000 legal professionals in more than 130 countries rely on Clio to run their legal world. Learn more at www.clio.com.