Law Firm Branding During a Crisis

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It's always been important for law firms and lawyers to resonate with the right clientele. This is not only important for firm growth and longevity but for the purpose, we all set out to accomplish when we became lawyers. To achieve this, your law firm needs a strong brand.

As our world evolves, so do the challenges associated with evolving your law firm's brand. Law firms, after all, are businesses, and no business is feeling entirely secure amidst global financial and healthcare turmoil.

The good news is that no law firm is alone in this challenge. Branding a law firm in any crisis is doable and rewarding—and can leave your firm stronger, nimbler, and better prepared for anything else that may come your way. After 14 years of practicing securities law and over 12 years of collaborating with law firms to develop successful brands, I'm going to share my expertise about what makes for stronger law firm branding, as well as tips to market your brand.

What is law firm branding?

Business Brand: Branding for law firms

Let's start by looking at what a brand is, in general.

A brand has a **two-prong definition.**

- First, it's the **intangible collection of perceptions** in a consumer's mind about your legal service.
- Second, a brand is a **promise that is made to clients** that then sets their expectations of you and your law firm.

In short, a brand is something that raises awareness by directly appealing to our emotions and ultimately contributes to attracting potential clients towards your firm.

The challenge here for all of us smart, analytical, left-brained lawyers is that this definition of law firm branding feels very "mushy," like something we can't put a finger on. Who can blame us?

There are tangible parts to your law firm's brand, like your firm logo, font, website, and color scheme, as well as, your physical building, etc. That's the easy part to manage, in my opinion. The intangible parts of building your brand are more challenging—these include your message and your presence.

However, developing these intangible pieces is absolutely key for communicating your brand consistently, building trust with clients, attracting potential clients, and staying connected. That is also why communication tools such as social media channels and a website are key to sharing your brand voice.

Personal Brand: Branding for lawyers

No law firm exists without employees, lawyers, and clients. Similarly, no law firm brand exists without the personal brands of each employee and lawyer. In other words, lawyer branding and marketing your legal firm are instrumental to your success.

Each time you think of a law firm's brand, you should immediately connect the thought to a memory of an interaction with—or recall—a person associated with that law firm. This memory should elicit an emotion. Emotions are what create that connection and recall with the client.

I define Personal Brand as a process of:

1. Unearthing your unique and relevant attributes
2. Communicating these attributes consistently to your audience
3. Managing how your audience perceives this brand

Your branding shows up anywhere the individual lawyers show up. As such, the firm brand is being projected anytime a lawyer employed at the firm represents themselves as an employee—whether at the grocery store, the beach, online, or at a traditional networking event.

Creating a shared understanding of this at your firm is key for strong law firm branding.

What makes a strong law firm brand?

What are the qualities of a strong law firm brand? The answer is more straightforward than you might think.

Self-Confidence

Upwards of 78% of anything you and I buy, as consumers, isn't based on the content, but rather on the way the product or service makes us *feel*.

This feeling precedes content. **So, *initially*, your law firm clients are not buying based on how great you are at the substantive practice of law but based on how you make them feel.**

The one thing that makes them feel good about you and your law firm is the self-confidence you exude. **Since a law firm can't exude confidence directly, this premise relies solely on the brand of each lawyer.** Self-confidence sells. It makes pitches easier, networking easier, and the "ask" easier.

So how can we get our self-confidence up? According to my formal research, there is a direct, inverse correlation between stress and self-confidence. As your stress goes up, your self-confidence must drop. This is true for even the most self-confident lawyer.

My work often revolves around strategies and tools for lawyers to easily and effectively **reduce their stress and thereby increase their self-confidence.** The first step is self-awareness—are you aware of how stressed you are? Next, you would want to look at what to do to reduce the stress in order to drive up self-confidence.

The "2 C's"

In brand strategy development, I refer to the important basics that make a brand strong as the "2 C's," clarity and consistency.

Clarity

Clarity is all about the content of the brand message. If you aren't clear, then your audience certainly won't understand the message you are trying to communicate.

Many law firms make the error of outsourcing everything about their brand creation to a brand or marketing agency without any real input or involvement in this process by everyone in the law firm. This is a good idea in theory, but how can another company possibly know your brand message better?

In my world of personal brand creation, clarity speaks directly to the first part of the definition of the personal brand above: Before a solid law firm brand can be built, the firm foundation must be built based on the clarity of each individual lawyer's brand. Each

lawyer must unearth their own unique and relevant attributes. Make sure you and your team are clear about what's unique and relevant about you as individuals, then distill that into a brand message. You'll end up with a clear brand identity that aligns with who you are.

Consistency

Your law firm clients' and prospective clients' attention spans have shrunk over the years. I refer to this as being "overtexted, overtweeted, overcaffeinated." This means without a consistent brand, your firm will be harder to remember.

It used to take about 3-5 "touches" (outbound marketing communication emails, calls, in-person conversations) before someone remembered you. Then the number increased to 6-9 touches. Given the COVID 19 pandemic, that number is likely much higher now.

Consistency is critical to your audiences' ability to recall you. Consistent brands bring about a sense of safety—if you tell me the same thing consistently, then I'm more likely to feel safe with you because I know what to expect. Safety leads to trust. **Prospective law firm clients trust what feels safe to them, and they buy what they trust.**

Thus, if your brand message is clear and consistent across all marketing channels, your target audience (current clients and prospective clients) are much more likely to recall your brand and bring their business to your law firm. All of this hinges on a self-confident brand message your law firm brand sends, based on the individual brands of each lawyer.

How to create your law firm's brand

I've discovered that most of us lawyers are very good at what we do for a living because we have an overwhelming desire to get it right. Some call this perfectionism. I call it a drive to succeed and give good service.

Creating your law firm brand likely calls up your need to succeed and perhaps, to be perfect. Please don't give in to the need to perfect your brand from the start, because this will add to your stress.

As I tell all my audiences, **branding is a marathon, not a sprint.** In my work with law firm clients, this process takes a good *eight months*. Anything effective and compelling takes time and patience.

So, start slow and consider the points below as a good start investing in the right places going forward. It doesn't matter how many lawyers there are in your firm: The rules are the same, as is the process.

1. Take a close look at who you are

As I stated above, individual lawyer branding is the foundation for a strong overall law firm brand. So it's important that you and your colleagues have a clear sense of who you are.

We all bring our human selves to work each day. We can't help it. Our human self includes the good, the bad, and the ugly. So, "who are you," as a human?

In my world, this question should make you uncomfortable. If not, then you are not growing and evolving, and neither is your law firm brand. We all think we know ourselves, but we often shy away from the painful parts of our lives. That's understandable, but making an effort to dig deeper and learn about yourself will make for a strong brand for your business.

You need to know enough about yourself to be able to clearly articulate why you practice law and how you can help clients. This process involves you looking at your natural talents and your motivations for showing up every day at work.

2. Determine your brand promise: Your story and unique selling proposition

Stop and consider what kind of experience clients can expect from your law firm brand. This must be truly different than other law firms and must clearly define your brand identity.

The heart and soul of this process for me as an expert is having lawyers draft their Personal Connection Story©. In order to effectively share your brand promise, tell others what you do, and have them connect to your law firm brand. **No one else has your story and that's why it's truly unique from others.**

Once you've drafted your full story (the brave one that includes the good, the bad, and the ugly), then we can parse out your brand promise, or USP (Unique Selling Proposition) that's truly unique to you. A USP clearly lays out the value that your firm, and only your firm, can offer clients and potential clients.

This all applies if you are a firm of one lawyer or 20 lawyers: No matter what, you're making a promise to your clients when they hire you, so you may as well have a clear brand promise to attract clients and set expectations.

3. Clarify your target audience

"If you sell to everyone, you sell to no one," is an old and wise adage because it's true. Most law firms tell me their target audience is anyone who can pay the bills. While that sounds pragmatic, it also sets your firm up for a very expensive marketing campaign.

Your target audience must be narrowed down as much as possible. Why? It's too expensive for your law firm to go out and market to "anyone who can pay the bills." If you're targeting everyone with your outreach, few people will be interested. Worse, you risk alienating those who *actually* might be interested in your services with watered-down messaging.

You must know something about your audience in order to emotionally connect with them. The narrower the audience, the more you can learn about your audience and thus, the more effective the outreach.

The easiest place to start is to stop and think about your best/favorite law firm clients. What attributes did they have in common (think personality)? Write these down, and build a profile of your law firm's target client. This will help guide the creation of your target audiences.

4. Zero in on your core messages

At this point, your law firm needs to distill everyone's story and personal brand at the firm into core messages. Branding is about how others feel about your law firm. Marketing is about sharing your brand message with your audience. These core messages must be unified and consistent. They must be authentic to your personal brands and each person's core values, as well.

This process takes time and it can't be done all by an outside party. While an outside party can guide your firm, you must all sit down and really think about what you want to "say" to the world/your audience. It's not enough to tell your client, "We care and we are good at what we do, so hire us."

Messaging is about concise, authentic, unique, witty language that grabs your audience's attention. Have a brainstorming session with your team, then zero in on the key messages you want your branding to carry.

5. Put your law firm's brand out there—consistently

Lastly, there comes the final step of putting your law firm brand in place. This would include designing a website, a social media presence, a logo, business cards, picking out the firm's color scheme, etc.

Oftentimes, lawyers want to do this step first. It feels good to have something to show whilst they are out there prospecting for new clients. Don't fall into this trap. This step won't be sound nor effective if you do it first. As the culmination of your law firm brand, the final product must be solid and based on a promise as outlined above. Otherwise, you have spent money on a website and logo and business cards that won't work for your firm.

For smaller firms, there is less input by others and so the process should go faster. However, I have seen 20 person firms collaborate and communicate well to move efficiently through all the steps necessary to create a stellar brand. So you may not have to wait as long as you think for a stellar law firm brand.

You can save time and money by tackling the branding process in chunks. Draft some copy and review it first, then hire a designer. This not only saves you time and money but also ensures your brand voice is heard well.

Projecting your law firm brand amidst a crisis

Marketing and selling is always a challenge, particularly as we aren't trained to market a business but to be good lawyers.

Marketing and selling are particularly challenging—if not downright scary—in a global crisis. Knowing when and how to sell in a crisis is even more challenging, especially if you want to preserve your law firm's brand and reputation. What's a lawyer to do? I get asked that question often.

I realize it seems like you have no choice but to sell in a crisis. Either that or face closing your doors. Take heart, it's easier than you want to believe.

Consider reframing the concept of "selling." As I discussed in my interview on Clio's Daily Matters podcast, just pick up the phone and start calling your clients with the mindset that you want to check in on them because you care. That's selling. Selling is about building trust and stronger relationships.

Above all else, be genuine, treat others as you want to be treated, and be kind to yourself. If you do these three things, I guarantee your law firm brand will project well amidst a crisis and always—helping you build lasting client relationships. It can be that

easy if you choose to see it that way.

Conclusion and additional help with branding for law firms

The world is changing and so should your branding. Law firms that are willing to be flexible, iterate, and grow will have winning brands always. **Change is guaranteed. Evolution is your choice.** Those law firms that don't resist, but welcome the process of evolving, growth, and self-discovery will attract the right clients. Being deliberate and having an intentional branding plan as outlined here is the right step.

You're ahead of the game because you took the time to read this post. So here are a few points to consider when you are thinking about the branding of your law firm:

- What is your own brand and each employees' brand? Develop these personal brands first.
- Do you know your target audience?
- Is the message and brand promise clear and consistent?
- Are you willing to get uncomfortable for the sake of continued law firm success?

Most importantly, take things slow and be kind to yourself and your colleagues. Change can be difficult, but it's not impossible.

Want more support with law firm branding? Here are some resources that will get off to a great start:

- Free Lawyers' Money Miracle Branding Webinar: June 17, 2020 (Part I) and June 19, 2020 (Part II)
- Lawyer's Branding Bootcamp: 7-week, group, branding workshop.
- ABA Law Practice Division: Free resources to support your marketing and growth needs.

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