

From Carrier Pigeons to Client Outreach: the Strategy Behind our Communications

By John J. Tufano

Carrier pigeons dispatched messages across the battlefields for ancient Persians and Romans. To transmit news or warn of impending danger, Native Americans would relay smoke signals. The electrical telegraph allowed encrypted messages to jump across the Atlantic Ocean. And now, the Age of the Internet removes geography as a barrier to how far our social networks reach. These are distinct forms of communication, state-of-the-art for their times.

To the legal industry, though - how does a historical snapshot of modes of communication apply? The old-fashioned, even ancient forms, teach us a valuable lesson, one that today's technology makes quite easy for us to forget. Pigeon post, smoke signals, and telegraphs (despite their electrical component) required a distinct strategy to their messaging. They were not sent at the near effortless stroke of a key. Their senders and receivers could not slink into autopilot, parroting generic messages in rapid fire. They were purposed, targeted, and intended to generate actions. Lawyers and law firms can realize a distinct advantage in their practices by taking the same strategic approach to communications with clients, employees, and the community.

Build a Strategy

Many lawyers and law firms operate from the foundation of a strategic plan. It might include financial models, business development goals, recruitment, even personal achievement ambitions. Some are governed annually, others by quarter. Every day, though, lawyers and law firms communicate, and rarely does a strategy guide. Almost every interaction with clients, coworkers, and the legal market is an exchange of messages that, when drive by a plan, can help elevate one's practice in a market saturated with XYZ firms.

Think for a moment about the following example: if a name or firm's letterhead was removed from a piece of correspondence, would a receiver be able to distinguish its content from the same sent by another? Would the receiver even care to? A communications strategy strips away anonymity and builds an identity. It helps define how and why a lawyer communicates. It stimulates receivers to latch on, to immediately recognize that their lawyer speaks distinctly to them.

The following highlights a selection of key elements that help steer a communications strategy for lawyers and law firms.

Communication is a Two-Way Road

The great Margaret Miller once quipped, "Most conversations are simply monologues delivered in the presence of a witness." Miller's thought sounds with a special ring for litigators: we could look to the theater of a witness stand to discuss communications, although that is a conversation for a different day. Common to all forms of lawyer communication, there is a relationship between us and our audience, both engaged in sending, receiving, interpreting, and reacting.

Know Yourself

Another core component to a communications strategy, we must first know who we are, our identity - or what we want it to be - among our peers, the community, and our clients. To

say one is "an estate planning lawyer" is a good start, but it does not paint the whole picture.

When I think in terms of an incomplete identity, I envision a basement room of a retail store housing clothing mannequins, heaped in a pile. Eyes wide open, but stiff, bloodless, and indistinguishable. They all have the figure to show the cut of a cloth, the identical figure, and their identity stops then and there. The example is abstract, but it shows that to stand out and truly connect with our audiences, we need to define who we are.

Completing the example, more than just "an estate planning lawyer" his or her identity may be "an estate planning lawyer whose focus is to be a helpful resource to ensure a person's accumulations in life are distributed exactly as they are intended, who also volunteers on a nonprofit's finance committee." Choosing and articulating an identity helps others recognize the personhood in each of us, avoiding the mannequin syndrome.

Know Your Audience

Some practices focus on a niche area of law, others a full spectrum of legal services. Knowing who we are and what we provide is further defined by knowing our audience. Addressing client pools, do we try to reach anyone who will need a lawyer? Do some of us practice in real estate, but target commercial developer clients? Whether new to the practice of law or standing on a 20-year career, a strategic communications plan can help us all learn by periodically asking ourselves about the identity of our audience. There are a number of ways to accomplish this, although arguably the simplest and most precise question to ask is "Whose problems do my skills best solve?" This framing helps us understand exactly what we can do and for whom we can do it.

Translate into Their Language

Lawyers suffer from the chronic ailment of speaking in tongues. Medical malpractice case law reads different than the elements of protecting mineral rights, which reads different from the general powers an agreement details for a voting shareholder. These languages (mostly) make sense to those who practice in these areas. It is important to remember that our audiences, our clients, co-workers, judges, are not necessarily as gifted/cursed in these languages.



Translating these tongues into the language of our listeners can transform centuries-old precedent into a living and breathing solution. We obtain knowledge over hours, years, spent reading cases or reviewing corporate filings. And, we want to share that knowledge to show that we can maneuver the legal trappings of real-world problems. However, the legal documents we draft are often written in the legal version of these real-world problems, at least from the perspective of (potential) clients. It is important to tell the story of drafting a contract's scope of work, for instance, with the awareness that the client might only really care about the contract's impact on his budget for labor and materials, and how those costs impact his quarterly profit margin.

These core components can guide us to recognize the need for communicating with a strategy in place, the importance of knowing our identity and those of our audiences, and how and why to communicate in ways that resonate with them. There are other components to consider, given each unique circumstance, such as the medium that carries a message and the ability to adjust to the changing needs of others. If there is anything to remember, it is that a communications strategy has enormous value and can prevent our client updates, internal memos, and trade journal articles from the likes of smoke signals sent in the pitch of a windy night, altogether missing their mark.



John J. Tufano
john.j.tufano@gmail.com

I Will Remember You

By Kathy Wiesman

Twenty-three plus years ago my husband decided to take a new job offer, a great opportunity for him and our family. As a native Texan, I said (in my outside voice), "Really? Ohio?" (There may have been a few more colorful words, but my memory is fuzzy.) After considering some options (divorce, smothering him with a pillow, running away from home, witness protection program), I came to Columbus kicking, screaming and crying.

But now, it's back to the Lone Star State we go (with some crying). January is my last month at the CBA. Our decision to retire is bittersweet, as we are excited to start a new chapter in our lives but sad to end another one.

It's hard to imagine that soon I won't be coming here. Things will be different, life won't be the same. In our new journey, I will be missing you more than you could ever know.

Who knew? I have spent some of the best days - and years - of my life here. I love this city and its people. Working at the Columbus Bar Association for the past 19 years has been an amazing experience. We have gone through many changes, but the fundamental principles have remained the same. Every change has been embraced by association members, and the philosophy of our association has been that change makes us stronger, better.

You have helped me grow as a person. Here, I have found not just co-workers but precious friends, and I will leave with some wonderful memories of the time we have spent together. Here, I have had the honor and privilege to work with so many remarkable board members, officers, presidents, committee chairs and members, and to witness the swearing in of both the first female and first African American CBA presidents. There are not enough words to express the thanks and appreciation of these great leaders. Without their passion and undying commitment to devote hundreds of hours of volunteer service, the Columbus Bar would not be the nationally-recognized and admired organization it is today. Without all of you, this Association would not exist. It has been my pleasure to serve it and you.

I've had the great fortune to help produce our Columbus Bar Friday newspaper and Columbus Bar Lawyers Quarterly magazine. And, of course, I have been so blessed to have worked beside two dedicated, innovative and simply remarkable executive directors, Jill Snitcher McQuain and Alex Lagusch - my bosses, but more importantly, my friends.

On a different note, anyone who knows me well knows that I am an avid college football fan, a girl who grew up and graduated from college in the Southwest Conference (yes, I am that old). I swore never to root for "those" Big Ten teams, but au contraire. I've acquired Ohio State necklaces, earrings, flags, banners, serving dishes, drinkware, tee shirts, sweatshirts, tennis shoes - you get the picture. Trust me, the Buckeyes will always have a presence wherever I am!

So, in the words of Dr. Suess, "Don't cry because it's over. Smile because it happened." I'm trying desperately to embrace that. Thank you all. I feel blessed beyond measure that I got to be a part of such a great team at THE Columbus Bar Association.



Kathy Wiesman
kathy@cbalaw.org