

That Corporate Message

Law firm leaders can learn from the CEO approach to communications.



Law Firm Administration
A Special Report

BY MARSHA REDMON

CEOs look like leaders because they have a consistent vision that they articulate powerfully in every context. Whether CEOs are speaking to managers, new employees, clients, or regulators, they customize the best corporate messages to address the interests of each audience. Law firm leaders, on the other hand, don't always take the time (or see the need) to come up with consistent messages or talking points that articulate their vision to their important audiences inside and outside the firm.

Let's face it: Internal communication at many law firms does not exist in an organized or effective fashion. External communication is often unplanned and inconsistent.

As law firms continue evolving into big businesses, they need to start using the same "best practices" in communication used by strong corporate leaders. Law firm management consultant Norm Rubenstein of the Zeughauser Group says the cost of not communicating clearly is just too high.

"Whether they are communicating with clients, prospects, recruits, alumni, or the media—among other external audiences—or with partners, associates, or everyone on the administrative team, law firm leaders have the Herculean task of ensuring that all of their constituents have the information they need to feel invested in the firm," he says. "In a competitive marketplace, the communication stakes couldn't be higher: True market leaders know that to ensure that their target audiences choose the firm—either as a place to work or as outside counsel—they need to be inspired and well-informed about the firm's value proposition. That means tailoring the right messages to the right audiences, and keeping the communications clear and constant."

One example of a law firm that has adopted corporate-style communications practices is Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld. Chairman Bruce McLean says communicating internally and externally about his firm's strategy and vision are key: "Internal

communications have been frequent and constant, and involve participation by partners about how the vision is crafted and articulated." In addition, the firm keeps associates in the loop about firm direction as well. "For our internal audiences we re-emphasize our firm vision and strategy at every stage: at our first meeting with summer associates, at our new associates meeting, and when we have midlevel and senior associate meetings," he says.

Akin Gump also works to communicate clearly with important external audiences: clients and other lawyers. "Our strategy and vision are always the same, but the way it's communicated is tailored to the different audiences," McLean says.

THREE SIMPLE STEPS

Through my communications training company, I've worked with law firms over the last eight years creating messages for many audiences including clients, the media, and internal groups. I've distilled the messaging process I use into three steps:

1. Messaging basics. Identify key elements of your firm by asking these questions:

- Who are the most important key audiences to you, internally and externally, and why?
- What are your firm's communication goals? What do you want each audience to do or know as a result of your communication, that will help you attain your firm goals?
- What are the benefits to your audiences? In other words, why should each audience listen to you and do what you ask—what's in it for them?
- Are there any negatives to counter? Is there misinformation or bad news that you need to correct?
- Do you have a consistent message? Do any of your messages to different audiences conflict with each other? Are there contradictory facts out there in the public or private domain?

Let's apply these messaging basics to a typical audience firms begin to focus on this time of year—summer associates.

- The key audience is your firm's 2007 summer associates.
- Your firm's communication goals are to offer clients top-quality legal work by hiring the smartest associates; to retain associates as long as possible for work quality and revenue reasons; and to meet diversity goals by recruiting and retaining diverse associates. In addition, you want every single summer associate who is given an offer to accept because you need at least the 50 associates in the summer class, probably more, to meet firm goals and strategy.
- The benefits to the audience are a top salary, the most comprehensive professional development and mentoring for associates, including business development training, many interesting pro bono opportunities, and a large number of diverse associates and partners, which prove the firm's commitment to diversity and a family-friendly work atmosphere.
- The negatives to counter are complaints on Vault (the online job research site) by last year's summer associates that the summer program was all work and no play.
- A contradictory fact would be that the firm just cut back drastically on its professional development offerings for associates, which would surely become public on Vault or some other online resource for law students.

2. Creating messages. Take the information above and reduce it to three to five main points that will get your audience to do (or know) what you want it to do (or know). Then find your best supporting proof, both "hard" data using numbers or other factual information and subjective proof, using illustrations or stories.

For example, one message could be that the firm has the most comprehensive professional development program for young associates, including soft skills business development training that most firms do not offer at all, and certainly not to young associates. In terms of factual proof, you could say that in 2006, 75 percent of first- to third-year associates participated in the following workshops and activities: "Introduction to Rainmaking—How it Works," "Presentation Skills for New Associates," and "Mentoring Through a Deal or Trial." This summer, the firm is offering "Oral Briefing Skills for Summer Associates." In terms of illustrations, tell the story about second-year associate Jane Smith who did the "Mentoring Through a Deal" program with her partner mentor and got to go to Hong Kong for the closing of the transaction.

3. Getting your messages heard. Now you have some messages, what next? To move people to action you have to tell them, show them, have them participate, and tell them again. Messages must be repeated, illustrated, and experienced to be believed. The bottom line is "don't just tell me—prove it to me." To do that, you need a communications plan. You must detail who will deliver the messages, how, when, and where the messages will be delivered, what events or methods can be used to give the audience hands-on experience of the messages, and other ways to reinforce and prove the messages.

Here are five ways to make sure these messages get our mythical summer class to say yes:

- Influence summer associates before they even arrive through pre-summer contact highlighting some of the events of the summer and incorporating the messages and illustrations. The first thing summer associates hear and see will influence how they perceive the entire summer.

- Hit summer associates with the messages and illustrations in the official presentation that opens the summer associate program.

- Throughout the summer, have topical professional development, mentoring and pro bono luncheons and workshops, with hands-on training or other experiences that prove the message points through first-hand experience. Experience can convince where mere words may not.

- Highlight the firm's strong diversity and work-life balance commitment through social events such as having diverse (and those who illustrate good work-life balance) senior associates and partners host small group lunches or events so associates get to know them and can ask questions important to them about diversity and work-life balance.

- Ensure everyone interacting with the summer associates knows the message points and encourage them to volunteer their own "proof" based upon their experiences at the firm. This is another chance for repetition and illustration of the messages.

In my work with law firms I often see firms first tackle formal messaging after developing a new strategic plan. Another good way to begin formal messaging is to start small by choosing one or two key events for the year, such as an important client seminar or the announcement of new partners, and create messages for one or two critical audiences.

AND DON'T FORGET

Here are a few more things to keep in mind to make your initial messaging sessions more successful. First, remember that messaging takes longer than you think it will. Don't expect to get it done in two hours. Many firms find it effective to set aside a block of time during a retreat or planning session offsite. Next, define clearly which audiences and messages you're working on. Keep it narrow and focused. Do not stray. Then consider having an outside messaging facilitator who asks questions and records and refines the messages. Leaders will tolerate an outsider asking basic "explain it to me" questions. An outsider will have a fresh eye on how to describe the firm. A messaging expert will also be able to challenge leaders more comfortably and effectively.

Messaging does not work when participants just say "yes." It takes tough questions and many rewrites to create powerful messages and illustrations. And finally, limit the number of people involved as much as possible. Consensus among lawyers is hard enough—too many people editing the messages will prolong and may simply derail the process.

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