

Stop Sending the Wrong Message: 4 Ways Lawyers Can Communicate More Effectively

By Kailee M. Goold

We've all been there.

Emailing or texting while a fellow attorney wraps up another CLE presentation. We do it because the presentation isn't capable of keeping our attention. The speaker reads wordy slides to the audience and is often so unprepared they speed through 15 slides in the last two minutes.

And yet, when it's our turn to present a topic to colleagues, clients or potential clients—we do the same thing! Let's stop the insanity.

Part of our job as attorneys is to communicate effectively. Whether we are advocating, fact-finding or explaining a complex idea—communication is an essential part of our profession.

And we have to face the truth: the way people exchange ideas and consume information has evolved. The average attention span is now a whopping eight seconds. We see the effects of this every day. News and industry insights are expressed in 140 characters. Clients want an immediate answer in a one-paragraph email.

What does this mean for us as attorneys?

We need to do a better job communicating. To survive in the face of a rapidly changing world, we have to do a better job sharing our solutions and advice with each other, referral sources and clients.

When people think of attorneys, they think of conservative, unapproachable, robot-like beings. Clients sometimes fear we are inefficient, long-winded and don't have their best interests in mind.

So what do we do when we are given the opportunity to express ourselves?

We often confirm those fears. We prove to them how impractical and out of touch we can be through our communication style. We waste opportunities to connect, find common ground and make our points. Our websites all say the same thing. Our blog posts read like antiquated law review articles. We render ourselves useless and uninteresting at our own presentations. We send multi-page memoranda when one page would do.

Our materials may as well read: "Hi, I am going to show you how little we have in common and why you might be frustrated working and communicating with me."

This is not to put us all down. We are moving in the right direction. We have started to recognize that law firms are not unlike other businesses and are subject to the same market forces. We have invested in the right tools and resources. We are surrounding ourselves with a formal and informal marketing infrastructure to help us shine. We have modern, functional websites and social media pages. We use PowerPoint and write blog posts. And we do many other things that may have been disregarded as unnecessary just five years ago.

However, we are not getting the most out of these resources. Clients engage us for our problem solving and legal analyses; this is our unique service. We are the only ones capable of transforming legal advice into blog posts, memos and presentations. But like anything else that can't keep pace with evolution, lawyers who cannot demonstrate their value through these media risk becoming virtually extinct.

Society is communicating differently. People and business are communicating differently. To provide the most

effective, client-centric legal service possible, lawyers need to communicate differently too.

Lawyers that can relate to others and communicate in a way that makes them more helpful than their peers will build more meaningful relationships and earn more and better business. Referral sources, clients, peers and colleagues all want to work with someone who can understand them and communicate on their level. To be more productive in building our careers as lawyers, our communications should become less technical and more practical. Less overwhelming and easier to consume. Many other professional service industries have adapted—this is our opportunity to do the same.

With that in mind, here are four simple ways we can communicate more effectively.

1. Change the way you PowerPoint. You are the most essential component of every presentation you give. Don't be lazy. Add value to your slides. Your slides should contain engaging imagery and minimal words (fewer than ten). Take some free online training in PowerPoint. Learn how to use SmartArt and avoid having a bulleted list on every slide. Use fewer case citations. You can always supplement your presentation with a handout, so there is no reason to turn the audience off with text-heavy slides.

2. Know your audience. Get online and explore how news sources, industry leaders and other professionals exchange ideas. It is the easiest way to learn and understand the kind of content that grabs and keeps attention. Then adapt your communications to take advantage of different audiences. When you book a presentation or have an opportunity to be published, ask about the audience and adjust your content and style.

3. Journalism 101: Retire the Quill. Not all writing is legal writing. Borrow from Journalism 101—blogs and articles should have enticing, engaging titles. Your content should be concise and easy to read. Don't be afraid of short paragraphs or lists.

4. Be authentic. People want to work with people they like and trust. There is always an appropriate time for formality and thoroughness, but that doesn't mean we can't communicate with some personality. So be yourself. You can even smile. Remember, it is not a zero sum game. We can be professional, prove ourselves experts and be likeable all at the same time.

There is tremendous opportunity for lawyers to differentiate themselves by evolving their communication style. And with a slight shift in the way we think about what it means to be a well-rounded lawyer, it can actually be pretty easy.

What are your thoughts on changing the way we communicate? Let's continue the discussion online - you can find me on Twitter @kaileegold using #CBAQuarterly.



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