

How Law Firm Social Norms Affect Culture

Invisible forces drive what we do every day. No, I am not talking about those forces we see in sci-fi movies, but real forces brought on by social norms. This was the topic of the keynote at the Legal Marketing Association Northeast conference last fall. Presenter [Jeff Leitner](#) discussed the ins and outs of these hidden norms.

In a nutshell, social norms are unwritten rules about how to behave in a particular social group or culture. They provide a key to understanding social influence in general and conformity in particular. Social norms are the accepted standards of behavior of social groups and places we work. Approximately 90 percent of our behavior is covered by social norms. In a law firm setting, social norms play a pivotal role in shaping a [law firm's culture](#).

What Are Some Common Social Norms?

One social norm everyone can relate to is elevator behavior. Upon getting on the elevator with a group of strangers, you turn around to face toward the door – often staring forward and rarely speaking while the elevator ascends or descends to your designated floor. How often do people get on the elevator and continue to face the back? And what would you think of that person if they did? Would that make you uncomfortable? Entering an elevator as a group has a different effect – people in the group often stand facing one another and converse while riding up or down.

How about teaching your teen driver the rules of the road? Yes, the speed limit is 55, but on this part of the highway, everyone goes 70. If every driver on the road is passing you by, then you are not part of the social norm. Once you pick up on that cue, you go faster to keep up.

Social norms tend to be things people care about. They can vary from group to group. You often don't have to be told about a social norm. Instead, you detect them based on instinct so you can conform to the group.

Social Norms in Law Firms

There are social norms in law firms as well. These can be a bit harder to identify, since they are part of the firm's internal culture and not part of the larger social norm. Navigating this can be tricky – even more so if you are a new law firm hire. In a recent article, Jaffe's Terry Isner discussed [how firm culture is important](#) and how it is used to define a law firm and its core values.

Identifying some of the hidden norms can be as simple as being a good observer and



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picking up on some basic cues. If you hear everyone addressing the senior managing partner as “Mr.” or “Ms.,” then you could be out of line in addressing them by their first names. In business, it is important to fit in with the internal culture. Just as with our social groups, our professional settings have to be a comfortable match.

Other norms may not be as obvious and may be fueled by someone not actually part of the firm. These people are considered the actors behind the norm and can be hard to identify. For instance, a law firm may support a special charity cause, but the driving force behind that cause could be the spouse of a senior partner. It most likely is a great cause, but does the charity fit the values of the firm? Does supporting it allow you to attract [good PR](#) for the firm and show the firm’s human side?

Shifting Law Firm Social Norms

Social norms in law firms, like culture, can be difficult to change. Is a specific norm a problem? Identifying how the norm came to be allows you to develop a way to change the norm or behavior – to subvert the norm and change the course. Sometimes this can be hidden in a story within the firm about how the norm came to be. Once this is identified, ask yourself who the key individuals are whom you can work with to help you make the change. Just like any new [marketing program](#) you want to initiate, you need to rally the people who support the change and can help influence the new direction.

If you can identify the obstacle, then you can solve the problem.

How have social norms affected your law firm? Leave a comment or reach out to me, [Alan E. Singles](#), at asingles@jaffepr.com.