

Don't Laugh – Humor Could Be an Effective PR Tool

April is [National Humor Month](#) (NHM), which not coincidentally kicks off with April Fool's Day. NHM was founded in 1976 by author and humorist [Larry Wilde](#) with the goal of raising awareness of the therapeutic and restorative benefits of joy and laughter. The more you know ... am I right?!

For me, every month is NHM – that's just how I roll. And typically, my sense of humor (often dry and self-deprecating) weaves seamlessly into my professional life as a communications practitioner – which makes me think about the value of humor in public relations, and for crisis communications in particular – even for the predominantly serious and conservatively branded legal industry.

Lawyers can and do have a sense of humor. Certainly, there is no shortage of [jokes about lawyers](#). And [humor can work in the courtroom](#), at the right time. But how might the “yucks” transfer to the PR arena? Going for gags might take some prodding and convincing of the stodgiest law firm principals but, for inspiration, consider these high-profile examples of how humor helped to de-escalate PR crises in the worlds of retail and manufacturing.

- When a *New York Times* (*NYT*) [opinion article](#) a few years ago took Walmart to task for problems associated with its low-wage structure, Walmart responded by publishing a fact-check [blog post](#) to have “some fun with it.” In the post, Walmart corrected what it considered to be inaccuracies in the *NYT* piece while highlighting some positive company attributes, all the while not appearing overly serious in the process. The post went viral and was successful at using humor to blunt a negative story about the corporate giant.
- Last year, when a leading character on the hit NBC drama “This is Us” died in a house fire caused by a faulty slow cooker, the industry-leading Crock-Pot brand of cookers also died a little. That's because many of the show's fans derided Crock-Pot on social media, threw away their cookers and deleted cookers from wedding registries. In response to this [communications crisis](#), Crock-Pot created the Twitter account [@CrockPotCares](#) to empathize with the show's heartbroken fans and promoted a statement asking customers not to “add to this tragedy by throwing your Crock-Pot Slow Cooker away,” but instead “all do our part and honor (the character's) legacy in the kitchen with Crock-Pot” by enjoying Crock-Pot comfort food with family. That, along with the [#CrockPotIsInnocent](#) hashtag, plus a media campaign delivering safety information about the brand, kept things light and tongue-in-cheek while creating positive impressions of the brand.
- Remember when last year's chicken shortage caused KFC to close hundreds of stores in the United Kingdom? Maybe you recall the company's response to the public's squawking and negative publicity over the closures. A [full-page newspaper ad](#) featured a



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“We’re Sorry” statement along with the letters “FCK,” which is, of course, an intentional and risqué re-ordering of the brand’s initials. The result was an appreciation for the company’s humility over the situation, while not shifting the blame to anyone or anything else.

One of the goals of PR and marketing is building relationships, so it shouldn’t be too much of a stretch to think about using humor in law firm PR and marketing as a means to make connections and project relatability with clients and prospects. If lawyers can embrace social media, maybe humor isn’t too much of a stretch after all. In the right doses and on the right topics, humor can help humanize a law firm brand and make attorneys seem more relatable.

Through my own research on humor in PR and marketing, I find most credible the following tips culled from a variety of communications professionals that could be applied to law firms dabbling in the funny.

- Consider current events as fodder for jokes – but stay clear of any discussion of politics, which is sure to alienate a large chunk of any audience.
- This should be obvious, but never make tasteless, off-color, sexist, ethnic or racist jokes.
- Don’t make light of any of the firm’s cases, all of which are serious business for those involved. And *never* joke about other law firms.
- Self-deprecating humor often works best because it involves making jokes at one’s own expense, so it’s less likely to offend anyone else.
- Tread lightly. Unless you’re working for the Laugh Factory Law Firm (which probably will never exist), a generally whimsical slant or witty one-liner can elicit a positive response, but shouldn’t keep going until the host cuts off the mike.
- Puns and other clever phrases can be applied artfully to the law. Consider hiring a professional who writes comedy for a living to strategize and write highly effective humor-infused marketing, PR or ad copy. Funny is a skill, just like writing copy for an ad or a website.

The takeaway here is to at least think about how humor could enhance your law firm PR messaging – if the right project or [crisis](#) calls for it. Plus, studies have shown that humor is more memorable and more effective than a serious point of view. It’s a little out-of-the-box and it’s not easy to do humor well, but it could offer another differentiator in the ultra-competitive law firm landscape.

Finally, one harmless, silly lawyer joke for the road: “When attorneys die, why do they bury them 600 feet underground? Because deep down, they’re really nice people.”

We think so, too!

Do you know of any high- or low-profile examples of law firms that have used humor effectively for a major PR campaign or crisis communications? I would love to hear about some examples to share in a future blog post. Contact me at rlabuzinski@jaffepr.com.