

# The Critical Role of Law Firm PR during the COVID-19 Crisis

Nothing has dominated the news over the last four-plus months like the COVID-19 pandemic, and understandably so. For the legal industry, the crisis has created realities, challenges and even opportunities that some law firms have addressed head-on in rising to the occasion, while others have shied away due to lack of resolve, lack of focus, logistical realities complicated by the crisis, purposeful determination to shift focus or some combination thereof.

One of the key goals and purposes of legal public relations – during the best of times and certainly during a crisis – is to place positive news for a firm in news stories. Advertising may be curtailed during a crisis like COVID-19, since marketing dollars are some of the first to be cut, and creative boasting about capabilities or successes is not a good look for a brand in such times. As dictated by a rare crisis like COVID-19 that shuts down face-to-face encounters, in-person marketing strategies and initiatives have also been mostly off the table, and it has taken some time for virtual replacements to breathe and find their footing.

However, PR is earned and sustainable, especially during a crisis. That's why PR is positioned to step up, take a leadership position and have the greatest impact on company reputation during tumultuous times. The focus and approach necessarily changes during a crisis, but the work should go on.

Of course, analyzing the use of PR during the current crisis is not intended, in any way, to minimize the overriding priority of news coverage that has focused on educating the public about how to stay safe from contracting COVID-19, as well as understanding and dealing with the impact of the pandemic on individuals and the world. At the same time, the business of law is critical to companies and other entities seeking to manage (and survive) through the crisis. Law firms have played an important role in educating their constituents about critical issues involving COVID-19. In so doing, many law firms have successfully used PR during the pandemic to enhance their brands and continue to raise the profile of their attorneys as thought leaders.

It's important to note that this advantageous use of PR came at a time when the news was consumed by COVID-19 coverage, and much of the business and trade media did not have the appetite or bandwidth for much of anything that did not relate to the pandemic. That ostensibly put a hold on PR efforts focused on a broad swath of legal, business and industry-specific topics that typically would drive marketing content during "normal" times.



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## COVID-19 Information about the Law for Clients and Other Constituents

The vast majority of PR for law firms – especially at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic – involved firms and attorneys proactively demonstrating their willingness to help clients navigate the impact of the crisis on their businesses, ranging from implications concerning employment law, health care and safety for all businesses, to matters concerning privacy, the hospitality industry, bankruptcy, intellectual property, insurance, government contracts and everything in between.

During this time, law firm thought leadership has been consumed by offering insights and best practices tailored to unique COVID-19 issues and events, as well as insights related to preparing for and dealing with COVID-19-related legislation, regulation and litigation now and in the future. Most large and mid-size firms organized teams of lawyers dedicated to addressing COVID-19, developed website and other external messaging around the platform, and regularly disseminated applicable articles and client alerts. They also sought out opportunities to share related insights with reporters and through articles published in media outlets, including legal, business and vertical industry trade publications.

Clients and media were craving – and still are, to varying extents, depending on the industry and scope or region of the country – COVID-19-related content that attempts to outline the new world under the cloud of the pandemic. PR has played a fundamental role in helping law firms find their audiences during this time and hone their messages to be informative, relatable, timely, and with a sensitivity and tone that rises to the gravity of the pandemic.

## News about Law Firms and Lawyers' Volunteer and Philanthropic Efforts for COVID-19 Relief (and Support of Racial Justice)

As supporters of the communities in which they do business, many law firms regularly contribute money and staffing to local drives for food and other necessities, as well as donate pro bono legal services to segments of society in need. With the onset of COVID-19 causing businesses to shutter and employees to lose jobs, the need for help intensified to the immediate. Local and national legal media outlets reported on numerous instances of law firms stepping up to help their communities and vulnerable populations. Many firms also announced programs and initiatives to provide legal services to individuals affected by COVID-19. PR for these announcements was soft – as would be expected – but was still critical for furthering strategic messaging goals of the participating firms.

Around the same time and in a similar vein, PR was instrumental in sharing the news when law firms began making statements supporting racial justice and pledging funds to organizations that advance this cause as the nation was (and still is) embroiled in a crisis amid a crisis: the nationwide protests against racial inequality sparked by incidents of excessive police force against and killing of Black Americans. According to legal media reporting, dozens of law firms of all sizes have issued statements focused on racial

justice, and many pledged significant monetary donations. Driven by PR, the news about the legal industry's support for the cause was mostly positive in a sea of negative coverage revolving around the issues of inequality, police brutality, racism, and protests turned violent or destructive.

## Sharing Other Good News of the Non-COVID-19 Variety

Perhaps one of the most-interesting implications of COVID-19 relating to PR's role for law firms and attorneys has concerned publicity about routine news from law firms, such as firm and client successes, new laterals, appointments and accolades, and other non-critical legal news.

True – routine news announcements from lawyers and law firms have been tamped down to allow focus on COVID-19-related guidance and because many firms have been squeamish about promoting their good news amid a national crisis. More recently, though, many firms have slowly started to re-engage their audiences with PR about their successes and other firm news, while others still are shy about coming across as boastful in any way in the current climate. While that sensitivity has been laudable, it also has been extreme in some cases. Some firms and attorneys haven't even wanted to announce new hires, for example, and have been absolutely averse to promoting client successes or accolades.

On the other hand, audiences are becoming immune to the constant barrage of COVID-19 coverage, and are now looking for – and some say need – something else to stay engaged and offer some semblance of normalcy. They need to be informed about critical pandemic news, of course, but they also need to be educated and informed in their areas of personal and professional interests. Until a couple of months ago, and even now still, this conundrum signals an opportunity for firms to get noticed more than when there was a total glut of "routine" news – the old normal before COVID-19. Editors and reporters with legal and vertical industry trade publications are actually craving content in these trying times, and for many readers, that routine industry news is welcomed and encouraged.

The future of the COVID-19 pandemic is unknown, and marketers in all industries will have to adjust as the landscape evolves, but now is not the time to stop or even curtail PR efforts to support law firm marketing. Whether it offers COVID-19-related business guidance, thought leadership on non-pandemic-related topics, or routine firm and attorney news that help builds brands and awareness, audiences and constituents seem ready and eager to consume what PR can deliver, even while the pandemic continues until its still-unknown conclusion.

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