

PR Postcards from the Edge!

The year 2020 was full of chaotic events and disturbing experiences. It's hard to believe it was all crammed into 12 months - well, 13, if you include the Capitol insurrection in January 2021.

Here are my insights on the legal industry's responses to 2020's two most-significant events.

How Law Firms Managed the COVID-19 Pandemic

As the COVID-19 pandemic hit, many law firms, like the rest of the world, went into panic mode. Amid mandatory lockdowns, law firms had to rapidly move operations online and adapt to working from home. Courthouses closed, government agencies went to skeleton staffs and entire industry segments shut down. Law firms were unsure how their clients would adapt or, in some cases, survive. Events such as trade conferences, legal seminars and even client meetings were canceled, postponed or moved online.

I will be honest: I was skeptical that law firms, not known for embracing change, would adapt to the challenge of remote work - but I was pleasantly surprised. Thanks to their heavy investment in IT, most firms made the switch fairly seamlessly and continued to work without interruption. When social distancing became the norm, attorneys learned virtual meeting options such as Zoom and Webex quickly. Since my Jaffe colleagues and I already worked from home, we offered tips on telecommuting to our lawyer clients.

Of course, we all know the challenges. Juggling work and homeschooling children. Caring for babies and toddlers since daycares were closed. Providing elder care at a distance. Somehow, attorneys managed. It helped that a lot of people were in the same boat.

I think the one silver lining of this whole work-from-home experience is that many law firms finally came to the realization that attorneys don't have to be in the office to be productive. Attorneys with young children probably benefit the most from this revelation. I never cease to be amazed at how parents manage a career and family. There is no question that attorneys can work from home when necessary and be just as productive.

The pandemic will have a lasting impact, and [virtual and hybrid event formats](#) will continue to grow. Moving events online meant restructuring plans and managing virtual technological and communication logistics. Keynote speakers, session presenters or panelists had to develop different skills to captivate and engage a virtual audience. PR agencies became adept at handling the unique pressures that accompany virtual [event speaking preparation and presentation](#).



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How Law Firms Responded to Black Lives Matter, Diversity and Inclusion

In the midst of the pandemic, on [May 25, 2020](#), a white police officer in Minnesota kneeled on the neck of a Black man named George Floyd for 8 minutes and suffocated him to death for allegedly using a counterfeit \$20 bill. The incident was caught on camera and sparked mass protests around the world. It also sparked introspection for many institutions and organizations.

In an industry that has long struggled with [recruitment](#), retention and promotion of minority lawyers, law firms knew they had to look inward and determine what they could do to be better at confronting racism and inequality, not just in the workplace but in the community.

As a result, law firms rushed to profess a commitment to improving representation and retention of Black law students and lawyers, and to implement various diversity programs and initiatives. They released statements, formed internal committees, sent emails to their communities and posted messages of solidarity on social media. Much of this had been done before, but the difference, at least in my opinion, was the feeling that this time, they were sincere. This commitment to racial justice and equality had a genuine urgency.

Law firms quickly found ways to support the movement despite the disruption caused by the pandemic. My client McCarter & English started the Social Justice Project (SJP), tasked with advancing “the firm’s far-reaching initiatives to dismantle structural racism and combat the impact of racial injustice in our communities.” As part of the SJP, the firm held a virtual town hall that featured several Black attorneys who shared the professional challenges they have faced. I was invited to join the event.

One attorney, a Black female partner, shared an experience about walking into an event she was hosting. A woman approached her and, assuming she was part of the catering staff, handed her an empty plate. Not surprisingly, this ruined the event for the attorney. Nearly every Black attorney at the town hall recounted the number of times they showed up to represent a client in court and were informed, usually by the bailiff, that the probation office was down the hall. These stories were uncomfortable to hear and even harder for the attorneys to share, but they were necessary to talk about.

After many years of assisting law firms with their PR and marketing efforts, including promoting their commitment to diversity and inclusion, I felt the atmosphere in 2020 indicated a real possibility for change. I was happy to help firms identify ways to promote their efforts.

Resilience and Change in the Legal Industry

Overall, the legal industry, and specifically my clients, succeeded in meeting last year’s challenges head-on. They proved their ability to adapt to drastic change and recognized the necessity of addressing social issues that affect us all. Perhaps it was not the worst year after all.

Need assistance with how to use PR when a major event occurs? Contact me, Carlos Arcos, at carcos@jaffepr.com.