

How can strategic storytelling support law firm business development?

Jaffe's Newsstand has previously addressed [how a winning business development strategy](#) starts with a collaboration of ways to raise awareness while building and fostering relationships. The most-successful PR & BD campaigns include a mix of media relations, bylined articles, social media, rankings and lists, blogging, podcasts, videos, and speaking at events. [Law firm content](#), whether verbal or written, has to affect the relationship. As marketers, we want to ensure that our communications are effective, reaching audiences with meaningful messages.

I recently met with Kurt MacDonald and Terry Rubin, founders of [The Professional Communicators](#), to find out how law firms can maximize the power of their verbal communications. The Professional Communicators specialize in improving the spoken communications that underlie successful business management and execution. Terry and Kurt have coached hundreds of speakers in how to build engaging content, tell strategic stories and convey a positive executive presence.

Terry is a seasoned communications expert and storyteller who has spent his career helping individuals perfect their messages and presentation skills, and Kurt is an award-winning teacher and experienced content creator. Through workshops, bootcamps and one-on-one coaching, Kurt and Terry help companies capitalize on business communication opportunities, because – as we all know – there are no second chances to make your message stick.

Communication Plays a Critical Role in Every Facet of Building a Successful Law Firm

Terry explained that companies lose millions of dollars every year because of bad communication, whether it's a strategic plan or a sales pitch to a potential client. In law firms specifically, attorneys depend upon the spoken and written word to succeed in their daily work with clients, but there is generally a disconnect when it comes to the verbal communications of the law firm's value propositions and differentiators. "Lawyers go through law school and learn the law, but they are not taught how to understand the nuances of client relationships, or even how to generate new business," Terry said. "Litigators are naturally accustomed to speaking in court, but that type of communication is different from what you might say when providing an update to an existing client, cross-selling the firm's services or meeting with a potential client."

Developing new business is a skill that requires training. When a lawyer needs to communicate a law firm's results, skills and values, a presentation of bulleted lists of data may seem like the right approach. But chances are that the audience will forget those



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data points. How can the information leave a lasting memory? Terry and Kurt advise law firms to engage in training their attorneys to use strategic storytelling.

Why is Strategic Storytelling an Effective Tool for Attorneys?

Storytelling is not necessarily something that lawyers think about. But, as Jaffe's [Terry Isner has said](#), "By finding quality stories to share, you can generate an actual emotional response from your audience, one that they will inevitably attribute to your brand. The end result? Increased brand awareness and brand equity."

Kurt advises lawyers and marketing departments to use strategic storytelling to bring a firm's differentiators to life. The first step is to realize and learn what makes a good story: characters, tension, a climax, a resolution and some memorable word pictures. Then, the firm has to develop a list of stories. And then the attorneys, partners and marketers have to learn to tell those stories effectively.

"Recall the times you've solved problems, collaborated, exceeded expectations, handled adversity, made mistakes, made amends, set records, delivered on-time, said 'thank you' and led your organizations," Kurt said, "and you will begin to develop stories that are illustrative of your brand and really bring your message to life." These stories then populate a firm's story library.

Kurt and Terry describe the story library as a collection of deployable, strategic stories that bring differentiators to light. The best rainmakers, they say, tell the right story at the right time. Kurt mentioned that the American psychologist Jerome Bruner indicated that details are 22x more likely to be remembered if they were first presented in the context of a story. Just as litigators work hard to make complex data digestible for juries, judges and mediators to understand, so too should lawyers and marketers spend time on developing relatable stories that will resonate with their target audiences.

What is the Advantage of Having a Story Library?

A law firm's marketing department is likely to already have plenty of client presentations and business development decks that include lists of differentiators and other firm-specific details. Adding strategic stories to these presentations can influence external and internal audiences more effectively. Having a story library makes the process of assembling these presentations easier. But there are additional advantages to having a story library.

As Kurt and Terry explain, companies that develop and share their stories also shape their culture. Kurt mentioned Nordstrom's legendary customer service as an example. Just Google that phrase and you'll see story after story about customers' outstanding experiences with Nordstrom employees. These stories are essentially a library for Nordstrom, influencing customers and defining the retailer's culture for both internal and external audiences.

Law firms can develop a similar library of positive client interactions with examples of

lawyers going above and beyond what a client expected, including stories of how legal teams achieved results, handled unpredictable situations or solved a tricky problem. By adding information about client satisfaction, the story library supports the firm's values and culture.

Should Lawyers Also Be Marketers?

By default, lawyers are part of the marketing team. Touchpoints with clients, referral sources and prospects happen all the time, whether socially in the community, formally during an interview with a prospective client who is talking to competing firms or when meeting new people at an industry event. These opportunities to communicate verbally require purposeful thought about how to talk about the firm, the individual and the work that can be done for a client. The lawyer may want to say that the firm is the most "fill in the blank" – economical, innovative, client-focused – but Kurt and Terry want the lawyer to go further, to "excite and delight" the listener with stories that are effective and memorable. Think Nordstrom's.

How to Use Storytelling to Leverage Firm News

I posed a communications scenario to Kurt and Terry that most law firms encounter: the anniversary. Whether it's five years or 100 years, a firm's anniversary is a milestone that many marketing departments are asked to promote. Terry, whose background includes two decades as an award-winning producer with the PBS Newshour, recalls receiving anniversary pitches from all kinds of businesses.

Journalists and publicists alike know that anniversary pitches can fall flat, and that is because they tend to be based on a single data point: the number of years in business. Taking Kurt and Terry's advice on storytelling, a firm has to go beyond the number. Their advice is to look to the people who have been at the firm during many of these years, because they will have a wealth of stories. Ask them about successful moments, creative applications of the law, long shots they were able to win due to legal ingenuity. These stories of what they have experienced as remarkable or unique times are implicit to the meaning of anniversary. These stories, rather than the anniversary's number, will be of interest to the target audience, and will leave a memorable impression. Plus, the stories then live in the firm's story library, where they can be pulled for additional communication needs.

A profile piece is another important PR opportunity which can happen when a lateral joins a firm or a lawyer is promoted to head a practice group. A reporter may ask the lawyer to answer a few questions about the impact they will have on a practice or industry, or to describe their personal career path. The resulting profile will be a communications and marketing tool, and creates an opportunity to employ storytelling and provide memorable content for readers. By answering the profile questions with stories, the article will be more likely to stick in a reader's memory and influence a downstream decision.

The story library can also help firms describe case victories more persuasively. Kurt and Terry encourage marketers to ask lawyers to take some time to verbally describe what their last case was about, explain what some of the pain points were, and explain how

those were overcome to win or get the other side to agree to a settlement. This information takes shape as a story, and the case result goes beyond a data point to really illustrate the firm's knowledge and experience.

By collecting these stories in a story library, the firm provides a resource for other lawyers to refer to their colleagues' cases with the same level of detail.

Three Takeaways for Managing Partners, Attorneys and Marketers

Kurt and Terry appreciate the hard work that goes into all of the communications that support marketing and business development. If they had a magic wand to wave over law firms, they would impress three important messages upon lawyers:

1. Communication is important and is the difference in winning clients, creating an inviting engaging culture and being an influencer.
2. Firms need to illustrate differentiators and value propositions by developing stories and building a strategic story library.
3. Training lawyers and business development teams in what makes a great story and about how to execute and tell a story is key to incorporating the technique into a firm's effective communications plan.

I want to thank Kurt and Terry for their time and their insights. If you'd like to learn more about strategic storytelling as a business development tactic, please contact me, Liz Lindley, at llindley@jaffepr.com.

