

How to Communicate Your DEI Efforts

It's been nearly two years since the senseless murder of George Floyd exposed the United States' long-standing history of racial and social inequities. Law firms, like millions of other corporations in this country, have discussed diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) for many years, but the horror and gross injustice of Floyd's death, amplified by seeing it happen on video, led organizations to renew efforts to cultivate workplaces that are more diverse, equitable and inclusive.



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This usually requires a culture shift, which is not always easy or immediately attainable, and it's not unusual for companies to express a level of discomfort when reporting on their DEI efforts. However, communicating what you're doing to address DEI is no longer optional, internally or externally. Your employees and your clients expect a deeper level of commitment and action.

How can you communicate about your efforts if you fell short of your goal? How do you authentically highlight positive outcomes without it appearing as a PR spin? Here are three strategies to help firms communicate about this sensitive but important topic.

Be Transparent

Transparency, truth and openness spread knowledge that empowers people and businesses to do better work together. Regardless of how you're doing, failing to be transparent – or completely ignoring diversity and inclusion in your communications altogether – could be perceived as if you're hiding something negative. Celebrate your accomplishments, own your disappointments, clearly communicate your challenges and present a plan for improvement. Not only will your audience appreciate your candor, but you will also demonstrate that you are taking your goals and commitments seriously.

Highlight Results, Not Aspirational Intentions

Once you set your aspirational goals, you must follow through. Your audience wants to hear about results, not good intentions, so highlight every outcome, even if you must start small. Feature that newly formed women's group on your website, in your employee newsletter and on social media. Share your attorneys' stories. Spotlight the new chair of the energy practice group who happens to be a Black woman. Storytelling can be a powerful tool.

Highlight the great and the not-so-great points, even if you don't reach your targets. Openly talk about how you missed the mark or what you could have done – and now will do – differently. When firms avoid addressing their lack of progress, their reports and efforts are often perceived as disingenuous. Companies must also demonstrate – and celebrate – advancements in diversity and inclusion, which will in turn keep the positive momentum going.

Cultivate a Culture of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

DEI researchers have found a wide chasm separating the organizations doing DEI work and those that are valuing the DEI work being done. It seems obvious, but it is not enough, to create a DEI plan. The best way to cultivate a culture of DEI in your firm is to imbed it in your business strategy and celebrate it internally. Develop a solid strategy for promoting a diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace, which should include making it an integral element of your internal communications and culture, as well as your external recruitment efforts.

Fostering an open-minded, accepting and inclusive community where differences are welcomed can be one of the most influential tactics in achieving your diversity and inclusion goals. A culture that thinks differently – and is encouraged to do so – will naturally act differently, be more inclusive and thrive through diversity.

Most firms are looking for new, more effective ways to attract, retain, engage and enable a diverse workforce. By communicating their DEI initiatives and outcomes based on the unique needs of their organizations, law firms can make progress and move the needle to create workplaces where diverse attorneys develop, grow and maintain their careers at their firms and in the legal industry for the long term.

As India's political and spiritual leader Mahatma Gandhi said, "Our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and the test of our civilization."

Do you need help with developing a communications strategy for your DEI efforts?
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