Advancing DEI through Public Relations

More and more businesses are investing in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts, and law firms are no exception. It’s important for law firms to carefully manage initiatives that support DEI and to monitor their initiatives for success because the legal industry is improving diversity much more slowly than other industries or professions. According to the American Bar Association (ABA), there have only been incremental improvements for both women and minorities over the past decade.

Although there are many notable exceptions, women and minorities are often underrepresented at law firms and in corporate in-house law departments, particularly in leadership positions. They also often receive lower compensation than non-diverse attorneys and are excluded from, or overlooked for, other important law firm and law department roles, opportunities and benefits.

As PR/marketing and communications professionals in the legal industry, we are in strategic positions of power to improve the state of DEI in the industry through how law firms and their leaders communicate about DEI-related issues. DEI will not succeed without the support of PR. PR should be involved not only in promoting firm DEI initiatives, but also in the development of any plan – and internal communications are just as important as external communications.

I had a chance to speak with Mark Baugh, Baker Donelson’s chief diversity and inclusion officer, about the importance of DEI.

Q: Why does DEI matter in the workplace?
A: DEI allows the workforce to become more efficient and profitable. Studies have shown that when workers believe the playing field at work is level, they are comfortable and can bring their authentic selves to work. Then they are more productive. Where there is a successful DEI initiative, there is usually better decision-making and work allocation.

Q: Why does DEI matter in law firms specifically?
A: The impact of implicit bias on the legal profession is wide-reaching. Implicit biases are when we have attitudes toward people, or associate stereotypes with them, without our conscious knowledge. This can affect our understanding, actions, perceptions and decisions about others. If we are not intentional and conscious in our interactions, implicit biases creep into everything from our depositions, negotiations and mediations to trials and interoffice interactions. Because our profession is premised on concepts of fair trials and justice, we should stand up and address situations of implicit bias that unfairly and unjustly impact others. Minority attorneys across the nation face implicit bias daily, and many fear the repercussions of standing up for themselves or others. We think about how our reactions will affect our reputations, rapport with our colleagues, the next person who looks like us and overall ability to do our job effectively. It can be difficult, or at least tricky, to react considering these fears. But it is in the best interest of ourselves, our colleagues, our mental health and the legal profession – not to mention principles of
integrity and justice that are at the heart of our work – to address these situations directly in a kind, yet firm, manner.

Q: Do any specific examples come to mind for how DEI can make a difference in law firms?
A: In law firms, DEI can be used to make employees more comfortable and in turn more productive. As an example, we have seen where law firms become more welcoming regarding issues pertaining to gender identity and sexual orientation, more people in law firms have become more comfortable with disclosing their sexual orientation. With the help of organizations such as the National Bar Association, Hispanic National Bar Association, National Asian Pacific American Bar Association, Lavender Law and Human Rights Campaign, to name a few, law firms have become more adept at addressing DEI in the workplace.

Q: Why are DEI jobs growing in demand?
A: DEI jobs are growing because DEI is becoming more a part of the fabric of many institutions. For years, there have been forecasts that the workforce and customers/clients were going to become more diverse. Some institutions planned for that diversity, while others reacted to that diversity. Beyond the workforce, if you are in a consumer-facing industry, then you no longer can sell a product to just one group of people and expect growth. You need to understand the buying habits of a wider audience, and having an effective diversity professional can assist the seller in being more sincere in reaching their target audience.

Q: What are your general thoughts about pursuing a DEI career path in 2022 and beyond?
A: DEI is a growing field. While several events have led many companies to intensify their diversity and inclusion efforts, the question is whether they will sustain those efforts. While those efforts may wane, the field is going to continue to grow and become more embedded in firms and companies.

Q: Which careers would make the best transition to a DEI role?
A: Legal and HR.

Editor’s note: HR has an important role to play in DEI by advancing and encouraging hiring and retaining staff from diverse backgrounds at all levels of a law firm or business. Legal’s role is to ensure that all laws affecting and protecting diversity in the workplace are known, followed and enforced as appropriate. Both sectors of a business can demonstrate the firm’s commitment to DEI through who is hired, promoted and supported among staff and clients.

As law firms intentionally focus on DEI efforts to strengthen their businesses, ideally the industry will make strides in leveling the playing field for minorities and women in the coming decade. Firms that have surged ahead of the industry in DEI have a valuable story to tell, for both for business growth and setting an example.

Need help communicating your firm’s message about DEI with PR? Contact me, Carlos Arcos, at carcos@jaffepr.com.