

Thinking About PR in Law Firm Responses to the War in Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing war bring up an interesting conundrum for law firms with business ties to Russia. It also sheds new light on the pattern of law firms (and other corporations) speaking out about social causes and events with significant societal implications.

This discussion is not even about whether a law firm should divest itself from doing business with Russian entities – that's a business issue (although overwhelming public pressure has the winds blowing in a clear direction). This is about how a law firm's actions can have PR implications, particularly when it comes to what is or is not communicated to stakeholders and the media.

Case in point –

Bloomberg's Vivia Chen pointed out in a recent [article](#) how one major law firm got slammed with negative PR for asking its lawyers not to express their personal views about Russia. The firm had to reverse course – which ended up shining an even brighter spotlight on its original transgression – and ultimately learned a hard-fought lesson about how not to navigate this turbulent issue from a PR perspective.

Of course, purposely keeping quiet about something is, in itself, a statement. In the broader marketplace, research has shown that a clear majority of millennials and Gen Z (which we can assume to include some purchasers of legal services) prefer brands and companies that have a point of view and stand for something. Many polls and studies have documented that today's clients are looking for their law firms and other vendors and service providers to be intentional and focused in their corporate and social responsibility initiatives, and that in turn has been shown to increase retention and loyalty among customers/clients.

Is getting out in front in a decisive, proactive and socially responsible way the correct approach? Setting aside any judgment of right or wrong, the case of the firm that took the aggressively silent approach suggests that being socially responsible and going on the record about it could be the most prudent approach from a PR perspective. Think back (not too far, as it turns out) to the highly publicized, racially charged killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. Many major law firms responded by embracing social activism relatively quickly by publicly addressing racial injustice and police brutality with strong statements and concrete actions.

Flash-forward to Ukraine. While a majority of affected law firms are acting in unison by cutting ties with Russian interests and embracing a socially conscious response to this moment, some are responding only after being publicly humiliated, and some reportedly have no plans to change or disengage from their Russian ties and are just hoping to keep



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under the radar, while also wishing for a quick end to the war. These outliers share the most risk of public condemnation and negative PR if the conflict in Ukraine is prolonged and stays in the headlines for many months or more.

Think about the following best practices when your firm does commit to taking a stand to achieve the best possible PR outcome from an event or situation mostly out of the firm's control.

First, remind everyone in the firm of its crisis communications guidelines and that any and all statements must be made only by the designated spokesperson(s).

A well-developed crisis communications plan is always a wise long-term investment for when unanticipated issues require thoughtful yet spur-of-the-moment actions and responses. In cases such as these, it's better to say a firm is reviewing its operations and client matters rather than say nothing (or tell employees to say nothing) if the firm is honestly not yet prepared to tell its story.

Make sure to know all the facts about a firm's involvements and entanglements before making any blanket statements or proclamations.

Major law firms with Russian offices, clients and other connections had to scramble when the war intensified quickly – and public condemnation was swift. The media were quick to inquire and report about how law firms were navigating these thorny issues, so firms ideally were well-prepared by at least anticipating the intense interest. This is, again, where an existing crisis communication plan is so important.

Communicate internally before making external statements.

Lawyers and staff should never learn about their firm's stance or actions on sensitive matters via the media. All key stakeholders should be informed and be allowed the opportunity to ask questions and get answers before the firm formulates and disseminates its external communications. Here also, it's better to say that the firm is still evaluating the situation rather than leave the matter unaddressed.

Be transparent, inclusive and bold in external messages.

Any successful crisis response is a proactive one that helps a firm get ahead of the situation and shape its own narrative before it is shaped by a media report or the public. Accordingly, information supplied to the press should be as prompt as possible while also accurate. Keep in mind that the messages should address the interests of not only the public, but also clients and other stakeholders, employees who want to respect and appreciate their firm, and other outside influencers such as activists and government entities as relevant.

In the case of involvement with Russia, a bold message will be most effective because anything short of that is likely to get lost in all the noise about the subject and similar messaging from other law firms. A bold message might include a strong statement of morality, such as strongly condemning the actions of the Russian government. In the case of Ukraine, if possible, it also may be helpful to consult with Ukrainian attorneys affiliated with the firm or others on the ground directly affected by the war and the firm's business in the region.

Match firm statements with socially conscious actions, when and where possible.

Many U.S. law firms, as well as some abroad, have not only cut ties with many Russian interests, but also have been offering pro bono legal services related to anticipated conflicts and court battles. Some firms have spearheaded efforts to raise money for Ukrainian humanitarian efforts. These types of initiatives not only are socially responsible and great gestures in themselves, but foster positive PR and help brunt the negative fallout from the inevitable loss of business and profits that result from cutting ties in response to the international conflict. Attorneys and staff involving themselves personally in a cause are also very likely to earn respect from stakeholders and (as a PR benefit) offer content for telling humanizing stories about their efforts via social and traditional media in the days and months to come.

As an example, one U.S. firm noted its proactive measures in a statement that read, in part, "We are not accepting any further instructions from businesses, entities or individuals connected with the current Russian regime, irrespective of whether they are sanctioned or not. In addition, we continue to review exiting from existing work for them where our professional obligations as lawyers allow. Where we cannot exit from current matters, we will donate the profits from that work to appropriate humanitarian and charitable causes. We are working with our charitable partners in every region to raise funds to help the people of Ukraine, as well as providing pro bono support to those Ukrainians and others who are being forced to relocate."

Well said, and good PR.

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