

Centering Inclusion in Firm Communications and Why It Matters

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Body

It's no secret that law firms have had an-often rude-awakening to the importance of authentically prioritizing diversity, equity and inclusion in their organizations and approach to legal services. In the nearly two years since the murder of George Floyd, a broader racial reckoning within the legal industry has spurred many of the country's top law firms to become more vocal about their commitments to meaningfully centering DEI.

For many firms, this has involved launching new diversity-oriented initiatives and hiring diversity professionals to drive change and address the industry's dismal diversity record. The number of minority attorneys in the country's top law firms is just 18.5%, and that's up from 17.8% in 2020, according to the [2021 American Lawyer Diversity Scorecard](#). Meanwhile, the number of minority partners sits at just 10.9%, a 0.6% increase from 2020.

The recent flurry of activity to improve those numbers, while important, highlights a glaring issue that stunts genuine progress: the singular focus on the "D" in "DEI." As noted in a recent American Lawyer [article](#), "Law firms have dedicated a great deal of focus to increasing diversity, but many are falling short on enacting meaningful changes to improve equity and inclusion."

To genuinely move the needle on DEI, law firms need to take a comprehensive approach that addresses issues around inclusion. Inclusion must be centered in everything firms do-and in everything they say. As the crucial link between firms and the messages that reach the market, legal marketing and communications teams play a key role in driving inclusion through firm communications. It is imperative that professionals within these departments understand the importance of inclusion and how inclusion-oriented communications practices directly contribute to firms' broader DEI efforts.

Why It Matters

For any organization, meaningful inclusion relies on the cultivation and sustainment of an environment in which all people are seen, heard and supported, have their contributions valued and are invited to share in organizational power and success. Inclusive communications hinges on the very same

principles. The sense of empowerment and belonging that drives inclusion efforts must be present and clear in all firm language and messages.

Marketing and communications teams are often the gatekeepers to the firm messages, voices and perspectives that are amplified to both internal and external audiences. Therefore, these teams must critically evaluate existing communications strategies and the broader approach guiding their firm's communications to determine whether practices are rooted in inclusion. The consequences of failing to center inclusion in communications, particularly amid today's highly competitive landscape, cannot be overstated. These risks are cultural, financial and reputational. By employing communications practices that undermine or directly contradict expressed DEI values, firms risk isolating, losing and failing to attract valuable lawyers, staff and clients.

Below are a few key considerations and recommendations for centering inclusion in communications.

(1) Develop an understanding of what DEI-related communications encompasses. A common misconception about DEI-related communications is that it focuses on communicating around explicit DEI initiatives (messaging for recruiting materials, firm websites and client proposals on commitment to DEI, internal and public-facing updates on DEI efforts, etc.) This is certainly a part of DEI communications, but the full scope is far broader. In fact, every facet of communications-and the broader business-should be filtered through the values of DEI.

A lack of working proficiency in DEI severely inhibits marketing and communications professionals' ability to make communications fully inclusive. To authentically communicate in inclusion-oriented ways, professionals must develop some fluency in DEI matters and have the language and knowledge necessary to tell stories effectively and communicate value propositions in ways that are compelling and meaningful.

With a stronger understanding of the core concepts of DEI work, communications teams can begin grappling with major inclusion-oriented questions such as: Around what stories and individuals or groups are we focusing our communications strategy and why? What do we need to say to-or ask-our own people to ensure they feel valued in what firm news we announce and how we choose to tout it externally? Will this message to our intended audience inspire a sense of belonging? What considerations should we be thinking about when crafting language around our people and their work? What factors impact these considerations?

(2) Consider who your communications decision-makers are. When evaluating the inclusiveness of communications practices and processes, teams should critically examine decision-making. In inclusive communications, the input is arguably more important than the output, as every message should be the result of thoughtful consideration about how all members of the intended audience will feel and respond. Should the input come from a select few individuals who have the same vantage point and similar unconscious biases and perspectives, the resulting decisions on what stories are told will reflect that limited view.

Questions to guide this decision-making examination include: Who at the firm, both within the department and at various levels of the organization, is responsible for shaping communications? How are decisions made around which communications initiatives are prioritized? Are there clear processes through which individuals outside of the communications function have an opportunity to proactively contribute to or provide feedback on firm communications?

This type of examination can provide a window into the factors stifling inclusion, as consolidated power in decision-making has a tremendous bearing on the messages, voices and perspectives that enter the market. This examination may also inform a host of immediate action items firms can take toward making practices more inclusive, such as creating opportunities for underrepresented team members-both within and outside of the communications function-to participate in building strategies, offering valuable perspective and making decisions about firm communications.

(3) Evaluate your firm spokespeople. When identifying spokespeople, law firms often tap those who hold the most power within the firm for any number of reasons ranging from seniority to rainmaking potential. This often leads to a homogenous group of spokespeople. A key part of inclusion, however, is creating space for people with a range of perspectives and experiences to be empowered and have opportunities to thrive.

Providing a more diverse group of talent with opportunities to participate in media and other public-facing engagements is a highly impactful way to foster inclusion. Not only do these opportunities support career advancement, but they ensure that the stories told and voices amplified by the firm are representative of a larger swath of the organization.

(4) Don't do it alone. Build a bridge between DEI and communications teams. At most law firms, DEI professionals and marketing and communications professionals work as separate teams. And in many cases, collaboration does not occur or is limited to projects that explicitly focus on firms' DEI work. Normalizing ongoing communication and collaboration with DEI professionals on all firm communications can bridge critical knowledge gaps and help marketing and communications teams identify blind spots that may be hindering inclusive messaging.

Working with the existing DEI team-and perhaps an outside DEI communications specialist, depending on organizational needs-can create the space to engage more thoroughly with fundamental questions around inclusive communications.

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While inclusion is difficult to measure, it is fundamental to the success of any DEI program. There may not be the same statistics to show improvement as seen with diversity, but organizations need to prioritize inclusion from all sides to remain competitive, attract and develop the best talent and avoid myriad risks. As the individuals largely responsible for ensuring that firms' "walk" and "talk" on DEI are aligned and ring true, communications professionals have important work to do.

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