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The Practice of Perception: The Communications Team's Role in a Law Firm

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Why the communications team's greatest value begins before the writing does

In law firms, communications teams are often brought in when someone believes the hard work is already finished. A decision has been made, an initiative is underway, or a lawyer has something to announce. The request sounds simple: write the message. But by that point, some of the most important communications decisions such as who needs to know, what they will care about, how they may respond, and whether the message supports the firm's broader goals, may already have been made without the people best equipped to answer those questions. The team's real value begins earlier, while there is still time to improve not only the message, but the thinking behind it.

The Message Is Not the Starting Point

The communications team manages many of the points through which audiences experience the firm, including proposals, website biographies, client alerts, media commentary, speaking opportunities, social content, and direct communications from firm leaders. Yet its work is not simply to make each piece polished. The team sees across practices, offices, and channels, allowing it to recognize what clients need to hear, to notice when a lawyer biography lists credentials without explaining the problems that lawyer solves, and to catch a legally precise client alert that lists the business consequence several paragraphs down.

I was reminded of this during an interview with the general counsel of a major franchise organization. She emphasized the importance of communicating effectively with the public and observed that many lawyers, both in-house and in private practice, do not fully appreciate the role communications professionals play in determining how information is shared, understood, and received. Her observation stayed with me because it captured a challenge communications teams confront every day: the people closest to a legal issue are not always the people best positioned to determine how others will understand it.

Legal ability may establish credibility, but communications professionals help audiences experience that credibility. This is the practice of perception: audiences judge a firm by what they experience, not by what the firm intends. That work means determining what context is missing, which details will matter outside the legal team, and how to preserve accuracy without losing relevance. A technically precise analysis may still leave a client or member of the public asking, "What does this mean for me?" Good teams anticipate that question before the material is published.

They also know that visibility is not automatically valuable. An article, interview, speaking engagement, or social post should connect a lawyer's experience to a question clients face and advance a genuine business priority. That sometimes requires the communications team to challenge the request: Is the audience likely to care? Does the message match what clients or the market are experiencing? Is the firm ready for the obvious next question? Strategic communications is as much about judgment and restraint as it is about reach.

The most reliable way to answer those questions is to ask clients directly. Client meetings give the communications team a firsthand view of how clients describe their challenges, what they value in outside counsel, and where the firm's message does or does not match their experience. It can show which topics deserve thought leadership, which strengths clients already associate with the firm, and which ones the firm has yet to make visible. When communications brings client feedback into planning conversations, the firm chooses its message, audience, and channel based on what clients actually say, not on internal opinion.

In a Crisis, Silence Is Also a Message

When a crisis hits, time speeds up, and every word and every delay carries a higher cost. When legal, operational, and reputational pressures converge, the communications team creates order by gathering verified facts, identifying affected audiences, coordinating messages, preparing spokespeople, monitoring reactions, and establishing a clear approval process. Silence may sometimes be appropriate, but clients, reporters, and the public will still read meaning into it.

A client shared this with me: "Legal strategy does not operate in a vacuum. A routine filing can become a headline, and what seems ordinary to litigators can quickly become a business or reputational problem."

This is why communications should be involved before the firm is under pressure, alongside leadership, legal counsel, operations, technology, human resources, and other relevant advisers. It is important for the communications lead to have a seat at the table when those decisions are made. The team can identify the audiences not yet in the room, surface questions decision makers may not be asking, and build a sequence for updates before incomplete or conflicting information fills the void. Once a crisis is public, the firm has far fewer choices.

A prompt response need not speculate. The communications team can prepare a measured holding statement that acknowledges the situation, explains what is being done, and commits to sharing verified information when possible. Its value lies not only in drafting the words, but also in advising who should speak, what different audiences need to hear, which channels to use, and when an update will be more helpful than silence.

A Consistent Voice Builds Trust Outside the Firm

Every lawyer and professional at the firm is also a messenger for it. Clients, prospects, referral sources, reporters, and the broader market form impressions from many small interactions, and those impressions are strongest when they are consistent. The communications team helps ensure that what the public hears from the firm, whether in a pitch, a panel, a client call, or a social post, reflects the same priorities, strengths, and direction.

That consistency starts inside the firm. Internal communications help every lawyer and staff member understand the firm's capabilities, brand, and tagline, along with the strategy behind them, so they can explain the firm clearly in their own words. When people know what the firm does well, where it is headed, and how its practices and offices connect, they speak with more confidence, make better introductions, and

recognize opportunities to bring colleagues into client conversations. The communications team supports this through regular firm news updates, onboarding, practice and industry briefings, and simple tools such as a firm overview and key messages. In a sense, everyone at a firm is a marketer. A firm that keeps its people informed and involved gives them a stake in its direction and a part in its success.

Because the team works across the firm, it often sees where external messages are beginning to diverge. It can sequence announcements so clients and the media hear significant news from the firm rather than from an outside source, prepare lawyers for client and reporter questions, and equip them with clear talking points. In this way, a consistent external voice is not an accident; it is one of the foundations of brand stewardship.

How the Communications Team Adds Strategic Value

- **Start with the audience.** Define what matters to readers and what they should understand or do next.
- **Connect visibility to strategy.** Support priority practices, industries, markets, and relationships rather than pursuing exposure for its own sake.
- **Translate without diluting.** Preserve legal accuracy while making the practical meaning clear.
- **Prepare before a crisis.** Establish roles, approval paths, spokesperson expectations, and response protocols in advance.
- **Measure meaningful outcomes.** Look beyond impressions to engagement, opportunities, relationship growth, and business impact.

These principles reflect the team's broader contribution. By participating early, the team can test whether a proposed action aligns with the firm's stated values, anticipate how different audiences may respond, identify information gaps, and recommend a plan that supports both immediate needs and long-term credibility.

In practice, that means bringing communications into the conversation at defined moments rather than leaving it to chance. Natural triggers include a lateral hire or departure, a merger or new office, a significant lawsuit or regulatory matter, a data security incident, and a change in firm leadership. Firms can make early involvement routine by placing communications on the agendas of leadership and practice group meetings, and by asking legal, risk, and practice leaders to alert the communications lead as soon as a trigger arises, not after the decision is final.

The strongest communications teams understand the firm's business, people, clients, markets, and risks. They do more than tell the firm's story: they connect leadership decisions to audience needs, equip lawyers and professionals to communicate with confidence, and help the organization act with consistency. Perception forms whether or not a firm plans for it. When communications has a seat at the table, the firm can shape it deliberately, making its expertise understood, strengthening relationships, and protecting the reputation it earns through every interaction.

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