

Is Your Marketing a Laughing

How Law Firms Are Winning Business with Humor

By Stacy West Clark

Lawyers have been stereotyped and lampooned for years and have “cheerfully” born the brunt of playful—and not so playful—ribbing. Now, they have started to use humor to their own advantage in marketing and recruiting materials. Why? Because humor works. It makes us pause and smile. It strikes a chord, alleviates stress for a second and makes that moment memorable.

As a result, humor can be a great strategy to, first, attract people to your message and, second, to convey your message successfully. When used correctly and tastefully, it is a powerful tool to tell a target audience that you are excellent lawyers who can get the job done but don't take yourselves too seriously and are a pleasure to work with.

While firms using humor are still in the minority, things may be changing. Let's take a look at some of the more notable examples of humor in marketing materials today.

Advertising with a Wink and a Smile

Bingham McCutchen, a Boston old-line megafirm, has been running a series of ads involving animals in funny situations. The ads include photos of an elephant parasailing and dogs piggy-backing each other to reach a plate of juicy hamburgers. The message? Bingham McCutchen can come up with creative solutions to business problems.

A second series of ads shows kids and adults in comical, real-life, “human” moments—the kind that cause us to simultaneously wince and chuckle. In one, a chubby baby's screaming face is photographed so well

that you literally feel the child wailing in your ear! The caption reads, “In litigation, getting what you want is everything.” A second ad pictures businessmen wincing at the taste of shots of whiskey with the caption, “Financial restructuring can be hard to swallow.” The text goes on to explain that the firm will do everything to make sure “important business

An advertisement for Bingham McCutchen featuring a photograph of a baby crying. The baby is wearing a blue hat and a white t-shirt, sitting in a wooden chair. The background shows a colorful stuffed animal and some toys. The text is overlaid on the image.

In litigation, getting what you want is everything.

Litigation can be rough. At Bingham McCutchen LLP, we work with you to identify what you want and then commit to achieving nothing less. Our litigators have the experience to design your best-case scenario and the drive and determination to make it happen. When it seems you can't always get what you want, the right firm is just what you need.

BINGHAM McCUTCHEN Legal insight. Business instinct.

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Matter?

Great partnerships — share common goals.



Finding the right partner can be rewarding, especially if that partner understands your goals and works with you to achieve them. Bingham McCutchen LLP commits to your business vision and draws from its pool of more than 850 talented lawyers to help make it a reality. Everything you need to reach places you never imagined.

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BINGHAM McCUTCHEN Legal insight. Business instinct.

Legal obstacles: Creative counsel finds a way.



An impasse in negotiations, unpredictable financial markets, weighty litigation – any number of legal or business issues can stop you in your tracks. But a firm that can keep you moving, no matter what the complication, can be invaluable. Bingham McCutchen LLP has the experience to anticipate potential troubles down the road and the creativity to resolve seemingly impossible problems. Strengths that can keep your business flying.

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BINGHAM McCUTCHEN Legal insight. Business instinct.

relationships don't sour."

Elizabeth Chambers, Bingham's chief marketing and strategy officer, says her firm's ads meet the first test of good advertising: "They are visually striking (rich in vibrant color), they hold your attention, and they are likable. As a result, they engage the reader right away and thus help us convey our message." In terms of the firm's

strategy in using humor, Chambers says, "Don't let our deep traditions and historical roots fool you. We are a fast-growing firm.... The dry humor in our ads has been extremely well received by all three audiences we must reach: our clients, our current employees, and the talent we hope to hire in the future."

You have to love some recent ads

placed by the Minneapolis firm Parsinen Kaplan Rosberg & Gotlieb in local consumer publications and Northwest Airlines' in-flight magazine. On all its ads, the firm has adopted the tag line "Not your average attorneys. Not your average law firm." And the ad campaign released this year speaks loudly of the firm culture. One ad states, "There are over 1,200 species of

petrified wood. Any of which, incidentally, are more fun to talk to than your average lawyer.” Another states: “The typical lawyer is a lot of fun. Getting smacked in the head with a mackerel fun.” Or my favorite: “We understand that people love lawyers. Just like they love getting their backs waxed.”

Parsinen Kaplan’s nontraditional marketing initiatives are successfully branding the firm and raising its profile, plus—though it isn’t always easy to quantify the success of marketing efforts—the positive return on the investment at this firm is clear. In the words of marketing director Mary Kay Ziniewicz, “It works because it’s true—funny and clever, just like the personalities at the firm. These are attorneys that you want to hang around with.”

Other firms with standout ad campaigns that bring home chuckles include New Orleans’ Gordon Arata McCollam Duplantis & Eagan; California’s Noland Hamerly Etienne & Hoss; and Chicago’s Segal McCambridge Singer & Mahoney. (See Ross Fishman’s article, starting on page 30, for more about these firms’ campaigns.)

Web Sites with a Wacky Touch

Lest anyone think that we in Philadelphia don’t have a sense of humor, check out www.hanglely.com, the Web site of Hanglely Aronchick Segal & Pudlin, one of the city’s most prestigious law firms. This 50-lawyer firm handles sophisticated legal work for some of the area’s largest companies. Its lawyers include Ivy League and U.S. Supreme Court clerk alums. However, the window on its site titled “The Lighter Side” reveals *another* aspect of these Philadelphia practitioners.

Take a gander at the site’s intelli-



gent ribbing of the firm’s lunches (titled—wink, wink—“The Heavier Side”), the song written to commemorate the firm’s purchase of a cow statue for its reception area (a great ditty), and the responses staff gave to the question: “Why do you like working at Hanglely?”

As firm president David Pudlin explains, “Humor is a fundamental component of our firm’s personality. In designing a Web site, we had to make a decision—should we try to hide our personality or should we celebrate it. We thought that was an easy choice.”

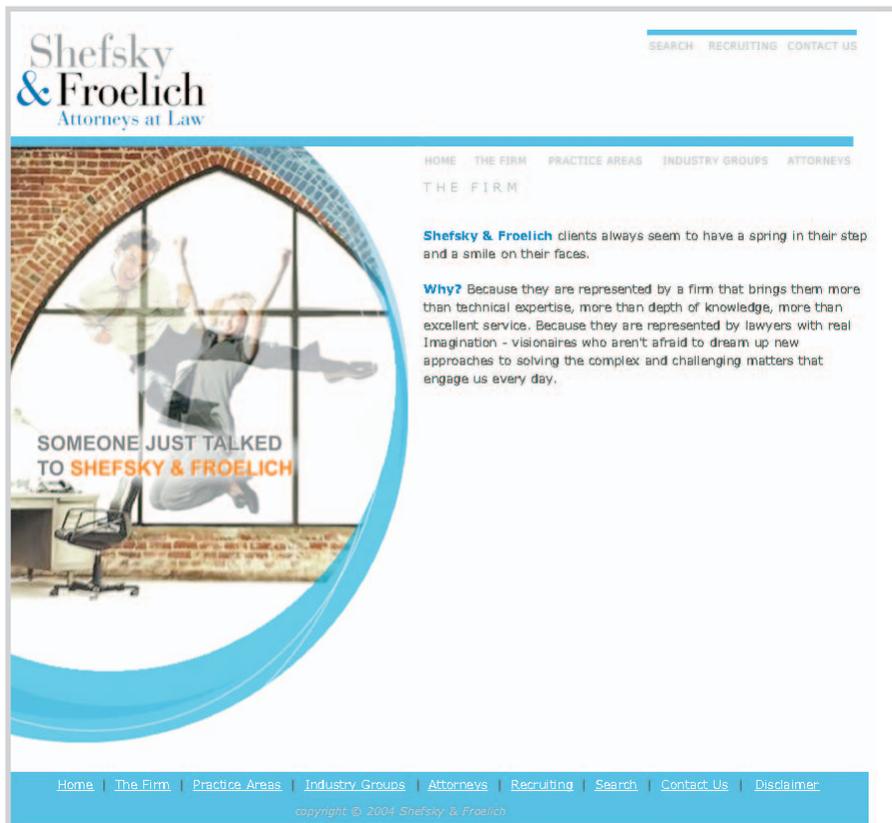
The Web site of Chicago’s Shefsky & Froelich shows photos of clients dancing and jumping in the air—ecstatic because they just talked to their imaginative lawyer. Go to www.shefskylaw.com and click on

“Imagination” to see the effect.

However, the most humorous and, frankly, outrageous law firm site I’ve seen is that of Denver firm Powers Phillips, at www.ppbfh.com. This 14-year-old firm specializes in government law, tax-exempt financings, civil, commercial and constitutional litigation, antitrust, real estate, family and health-care law. The firm does serious, sophisticated work for major Denver institutions, companies, individuals and government entities and boasts

many serious litigation victories, including some in front of the U.S. Supreme Court. Nonetheless, everything on the firm’s lengthy site (except the actual descriptions of practice areas) is done with sarcasm, humor and a wink.

The opening statement on the “Who We Are” page reads as follows: “Powers Phillips, P.C., is a small firm located in downtown Denver, within convenient walking distance of over 50 bars and a couple of donut shops.” Other section headings on the site include: “Sleazeball Attorneys,” “Agonized Clients” and “Hokey Stuff”—as well as the semi-subdued “Contact Us,” which states: “We welcome your comments and inquiries, especially if you wish to congratulate us, praise us or give us some money.” The “Real Story” bios of each lawyer contain



some great comedic writing. Name partner Kathryn Powers's bio carries the heading "Would you buy a used car from this woman?" Jay Powers's bio leads off with "He could have been a crooked politician." And the recruiting window—titled "Join the Party"—is headlined "Somewhere out there is a wacko, self-reliant Denver lawyer."

The comedy is fun—but does it work? According to partner Thomas P. McMahon, the impact of the humor has been huge. "Clients and other legal professionals love it and we have numbers to back it up. The firm has more than doubled in size and has exponentially expanded its areas of practice over the last 14 years." He says the firm has received laudatory feedback from all over the world. Litigation partner Wendy Weigler adds that the "firm's light-hearted approach is not only good for business, but it

makes the firm a truly unique and wonderful place to practice law."

Bang-up Letters and Hot Bookmarks

Some lawyers are using humor in different types of marketing materials. One of them, for example, is estate planning lawyer Al Orlowsky of Northbrook, Illinois, who found a light way to strengthen ties with his clients through some unconventional correspondence. He sent them a letter titled "Estate Planning for the Sopranos: An Estate Plan for Tony and Carmella Soprano—Getting the Most Bada-bang for Your Buck." The letter is hysterical—detailing such things as Tony's reaction to Carmella telling him she wanted to see a lawyer about planning their estate in case she and Tony were rubbed out.

In a very creative way, the letter

hammers home the message: Plan your estate now and we can make the process pleasurable instead of torturous! Clients called to thank Orlowsky for the letter and to say how much fun it was.

In a neat entry in the client gifts category, several years ago Philadelphia's Pepper Hamilton gave its clients a bookmark in the shape of a hot pepper to announce the firm's new Web site. The bookmark, covered with the Web site's address, read: "It's Better with Pepper. Come Find Out Why!"

And lastly, back to those clever folks at Parsinen Kaplan Rosberg & Gotlieb, who recently announced some new firm members in the following way: The firm "is proud to announce the return of Joan Kurlander (dog lover) and the hiring of associates Brad Frank (great sense of humor) and Anne Marie Solberg (Norwegian savant)."

Humor Works—But It's Not for Every Firm

Humor has been a great tool in helping these firms get their personalities across and deliver their messages to their target audiences. But it isn't right for every firm. If you really are not funny and your lawyers don't genuinely have a comical side, stay clear of laughter in your marketing. The effort will feel forced, be transparent to your audience and likely be ineffective.

And even if you can pull it off and use humor well, remember this: While you may not take yourself seriously, make sure your clients know that you're dead serious about their problems. **IP**

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