

What Is Your Identity As A Lawyer?

As you better understand your identity as a lawyer, you can better articulate your offer to potential clients and attract clients who are aligned with you

By Dennis Coyne

Several years ago, my daughter introduced me to Billy. They are the best of friends, both in their early 30's, adventurous and full of life. We have welcomed him into our family, and prize his considerate ways, playful antics and gentle manner.

Six weeks ago, a drunk driver lost control of her car and struck Billy, as he stood beside his car, in a quiet conversation with a friend. Her car struck him going 45 miles per hour, crushing Billy between her car and his. His injuries were massive and he nearly bled to death at the scene. This incident was her third DWI. She had no license and no insurance.

He Wants To Learn To Ski Again; But First He Wants To Walk

Now, as I sit beside him in the hospital, I am grateful to look into his bright eyes and see that his love of life has survived eight surgeries and more suffering than I can imagine. As we talk, he fingers the stump of his right leg, and tries to find a comfortable position for his left leg that the doctors are attempting to salvage. A heavy metal brace holds the leg stiff, with screws that pierce the skin and attach to the bones below

Billy loves skiing. As he talks about the sport, he reenacts a run down his favorite ski slope, with his upper body moving energetically from side to side, as he imagines each twist and turn. He says that one of his first calls after leaving the hospital will be to a nearby ski school. There, he can learn to ski again. But for now, he simply wants to walk again.

Obviously, Billy Needs A Lawyer

In a few days, Billy will have another surgery, with more to follow. Months of rehabilitation lie ahead. Through all of this, Billy is grateful to be alive. He only wishes he knew how to thank all of the many strangers who have worked behind the scenes to save his life.

Obviously, Billy needs a lawyer. As we talk, Billy says that his father found him an attorney. And, as he says that, I wonder who I'd have recommended if Billy's father had asked me for a referral.

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And as for you, whom would you have recommended? There are many attorneys who would be highly competent in a matter such as this one, yet there are likely only one or two you would recommend. More generally, when someone dear to you needs a referral, whom do you recommend? The considerations you make in such a referral are important, especially when the referral is for the sake of someone close to you.

And when attorneys refer clients to you, what qualities do they see in you? In other words, what is your identity as a lawyer? How do you see yourself and how do others see you?

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The identity of the lawyer is the subject of a CLE that I teach, with my colleague, Professor Howard Vogel of the Hamline Law School. The CLE is entitled: "From Rules to Ethics: Identity, Responsibility, and the Recovery of the Law as a Profession." In the course, we ask lawyers and judges to grapple with questions of identity and professionalism. We use reflective exercises, case studies and video excerpts to stimulate introspection and dialogue.

One of the exercises is to design a sign--a "shingle"--to be placed outside the law office for passersby to see. As you read this, I ask that you engage in the exercise, as it will inform you with respect to your identity and how others see you.

STEP ONE: The first line of the shingle is your name. Write down your name as you want it to appear.

Shingle line 1: _____.

STEP TWO: The second line refers to the fact that you are trained in the law and admitted to practice. It might refer to "Attorney", "Lawyer", "Licensed Attorney", etc. Identify your credentials on the second line of your shingle.

Shingle line 2: _____.

STEP THREE: The third line of the shingle will tell the passersby the services you offer. You can think of it as a modest form of advertising. To prepare for this, choose an image that might serve as a synonym for the work you do in your professional capacity. This image will not appear on the third line of the shingle. Rather, you can reserve it for use during your first interview with a new client to explain by analogy who you are as a lawyer and what your relation will be to the client if you are retained. For example, you might think of yourself as a warrior, a technician, a referee, a teacher, etc. So, now, fill in the following sentence:

"My image of my role as a lawyer is _____.

STEP FOUR: Complete the shingle by filling in the third line with a term or short phrase that describes what you offer a prospective client. The line will conclude with the words "offered here."

Shingle line 3: (Activity performed in the role): _____ offered here.

As an example, a doctor might have the following shingle:

Line 1: Robert H. Doe (name)

Line 2: Physician (professional credential)

Line 3: Healing offered here. (activity performed in the role)

Lawyers See Themselves In Myriad Ways

Many lawyers see themselves as fighters and warriors, and they typically offer "winning" to their clients, with some implying a win at any cost. Other lawyers see themselves as technicians, and may offer rationality and good drafting. Still others see themselves as healers, and it is healing and reconciliation that they offer.

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Some lawyers have more unusual images of themselves. In a recent CLE, one participant doing divorce work describes herself as a seamstress, helping clients to mend the tears in the family relationship. Another lawyer describes himself as a crossing guard, helping clients, snarled in a dispute, to resolve their dispute and get moving again. I see myself as a bridge builder, helping a client to bridge the differences that stand between the client and the other party.

How do you see your role as lawyer, and what do you offer your clients? Do you see your role differently today than you did when you started your practice? What role gives you the most satisfaction? Do you play different roles, in different circumstances, as the needs of clients change in the course of the representation? If so, do you feel authentic as you assume various roles? As you answer these questions, you will come to better understand your identity as a lawyer, and how others see you. And with that understanding, you can better articulate your offer to potential clients and attract clients who are aligned with you. And, with such clients, you will more likely be satisfied in the work you do in our profession.

Whom Would You Recommend To Represent Billy?

Let's return to Billy and his need for a referral. Assuming you know many competent lawyers, whom among those would you recommend to represent him? Someone in the image of the warrior; the technician; the healer; or perhaps some other image?

For myself, I would refer Billy to someone who can appreciate his courage and the enormity of his struggle, and respect Billy's focus on recovery. I would not want Billy to be exhausted in a courtroom brawl, by a lawyer who single-mindedly pursues the biggest possible award, without appreciating that such a contest might be beyond the emotional and physical limits of this young man. In the end, I want Billy to experience the law as a healing profession. I want some justice to be done. And I want the profession to earn his respect. ■



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