

CRAIN'S CLEVELAND BUSINESS

You may not reproduce, display on a website, distribute, sell or republish this article or data, or the information contained therein, without prior written consent. This printout and/or PDF is for personal usage only and not for any promotional usage. © Crain Communications Inc.

April 03, 2021 04:00 AM

A switch to digital efforts points to a hybrid marketing future

DOUGLAS J. GUTH

Contributed photo

Participants take part in a Tucker Ellis workshop called "Consistently Interrupting Systemic Bias in the Workplace." Top row, from left: Ndubisi Ezeolu, partner, Tucker Ellis; Valissa Turner Howard, first assistant deputy inspector general and chief diversity officer, Agency of Inspector General, Cuyahoga County. Bottom row: Sanford Watson, partner, Tucker Ellis; and Marquettes Robinson, counsel for the electrical sector, Eaton.

For Littler Mendelson and other Cleveland law offices, the pandemic spurred creativity and the embrace of a methodology not exactly top-of-mind in years past. The result was a fairly smooth — if occasionally anxiety-inducing — online transition that will endure even when the COVID-19 crisis recedes, firm officials said.

Law has never been at the bleeding edge of digital marketing, relying more on traditional efforts such as in-person seminars, golf outings and client dinners. That's not to say the industry is completely inexperienced in the online realm.

National firm [Littler Mendelson](#), which has an office in Cleveland, previously leveraged electronic methods to support face-to-face programming.

"Digital marketing was a content delivery stream for us," said Cheri Husney, Littler's chief marketing and business development officer who's based in Atlanta.

"If we hosted a seminar or something in person, we'd double down with that content flow through social or digital channels. We'd share quotes or speaker insights through Twitter, LinkedIn or Instagram."

When the pandemic forced a larger pivot toward digital outreach industrywide, Littler hosted internal training sessions for attorneys unaccustomed to working with clients through a screen. Husney and her team — supporting the firm's labor and employment focus — also posted interactive maps that allowed guests to view each state's reopening plans.

Over the course of 2020, Littler harnessed employer surveys to determine the shape of future content, a change from the traditional article or white paper that touched on a particular subject.

"We saw a lot of questions dealing with COVID news, like will employers have to require vaccines of their employees," Husney said. "We knew if we got people answers validated by facts, that would be something that resonated. To create content, the survey angle was the way to do it."

For Littler and other Cleveland law offices, the ongoing virus crisis spurred creativity and the embrace of a methodology not exactly top-of-mind in years past. The result was a fairly smooth — if occasionally anxiety-inducing — online transition that will endure even when the pandemic recedes, firm officials said.

"We like thinking ahead. We know what works and what engages clients," said Carrie Clark, director of marketing and business development at [Tucker Ellis](#). "Our front line is attorneys building relationships with potential clients, and what we're doing (in marketing) is underscoring those efforts."

The digital realm

In some respect, Tucker Ellis had prepared itself for a large-scale digital changeover even before last year. During 2019, the firm took a deep dive into its online strategy, implementing a new content relationship management system (CRM) to better direct how clients engaged with content. Detailed customer journey mapping helped staff parse interactions with clients while gaining insight into common pain points.

"We found that people wanted tailored communication that addressed their day-to-day concerns," Clark said. "Like a pharmaceutical client might want industry-related topics rather than getting blasted to a general list. They wouldn't want to weed through our topics that weren't relevant to their day-to-day life."

Tucker Ellis is also active on LinkedIn and Twitter, while producing a podcast pondering litigation around autonomous vehicles and other news of the day. Already ahead of the curve on the digital front, the firm increased distribution of client alerts by 162% when COVID-19 struck.

"On our CRM, we had a high delivery and engagement rate," Clark said. "We had segmented lists and got alerts to the right industry players."

Moving in-person programming online served as a truer test of Tucker Ellis' marketing flexibility. Its In-House Counsel Summit, an annual event covering a wide range of subjects, moved to a webinar format in autumn 2020 for the first time in its seven-year existence.

Staff began preparing for this possibility in April, having never before hosted the event online. Though a bit anxious about Zoom fatigue around seven hourlong presentations — covering crisis response, PPP loans and more — the event drew 300 new guests, an uptick from face-to-face programs that attracted about 140 people annually. So good was attendance for the event's first round, the firm decided to do a second series for a total of 13 sessions.

"We were able to expose our attorneys to hundreds of new people," Clark said. "So right there that's something our team wouldn't have thought possible when we had 140 people showing up."

Hybrid for 2021

As firms nationwide refined attorney social media profiles and Zoom gatherings, Cleveland-based [Benesch](#) amplified online content through its website and an electronic mailing list.

Meanwhile, Benesch utilized video conferencing to redeploy live entertainment and educational events. B-Sharp, a platform for women corporate counsel, ballooned from 20 guests to nearly 300 following the move online.

Although advertising spend remained at pre-pandemic levels, Benesch's nine-person marketing crew moved quickly to improve online outreach, chief marketing officer Jeanne Hammerstrom said.

"My team worked harder and faster than they've ever had to," Hammerstrom said. "I think we were a little scared at first — probably me more than anyone. I like that print in my hands, but I learned that digital is just as effective. And we can take that online content and repurpose it into a virtual education event like B-Sharp."

The pandemic may not have revolutionized how law offices reach the public, but it's likely that most firms won't completely return to traditional marketing means in 2021 and beyond.

For Hammerstrom, digital innovation can be part of the mix in disseminating industry-critical information.

"We learned how to use technology better," she said. "Face-to-face relationships are our business, but we'll work with clients to make them comfortable."

If virtual conferences, webinars and video happy hours are here to stay, it's essential for the industry to keep evolving, said Clark of Tucker Ellis.

"There was lots of nervousness about moving our summit online," she said. "We weren't sure we could pull off an online web series without IT crashing. But we're wired now as a firm to take chances."

Inline Play

Source URL: <https://www.crainscleveland.com/legal/switch-digital-efforts-points-hybrid-marketing-future>