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Lawyers must preserve professionalism

Professional presence is essential to standing out in the crowd of other lawyers. It is often the first thing noticed by prospective employers, clients and even judges or juries. Understanding how to cultivate an effective professional presence in today's world means we must be aware of our audience and the impression we create for that audience, both in person and on the Internet.

As a female litigator and a partner in a law firm, my audience usually consists of the courts in which my cases are pending. Before appearing before a judge, not only do I make myself aware of the local statutes and rules, I also make certain that both my demeanor during my argument and my appearance will be in compliance with local practices and will be well taken by that particular judge.

Last week, I argued a motion to dismiss a complaint that alleged that my client had violated the Illinois Human Rights Act. The case was pending in the Cook County Circuit Court. Counsel for the company I represented was based in Texas and was planning on appearing with me in court. Even though I had a good deal of prior experience with the court and judge, I polled other attorneys regarding their impressions and gathered any further information I could find about the judge. Ultimately, the judge ruled in our favor and dismissed the case with prejudice. Although our legal arguments were sound and obviously played a key role in this success, the fact that we looked and sounded credible during the argument contributed to our quick and decisive victory.

Likewise, if I am tasked with interviewing or deposing witnesses, in addition to carefully developing my questions, I also consider what

message I want to communicate through my in-person presence. If it is an informal setting or I want to ensure that the witness feels comfortable and open with me, I may dress less formally. On the other hand, if the witness is a high-level executive whom I think would respond better to formal attire, I make sure to wear a suit.

Treating clients and witnesses in an appropriate and responsive manner also enhances professional presence and a favorable outcome. How you react and handle challenging situations is critical. Communicating in a calm and decisive manner almost always wins the trust and loyalty of clients, judges and juries.

Corporate attorneys have similar considerations. Although transactional attorneys do not have to adhere to a courtroom dress code, knowing the client's business and the purpose for the meeting will dictate the appropriate attire. According to Marcia Owens, partner at Edwards, Wildman, Palmer LLP, "Professional presence goes beyond the clothes and hinges on

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whether you display confidence and good judgment. These attributes are critical in a transactional setting and come across in a number of ways — how you dress, how you correspond, how you treat others and how you handle a crisis.”

A younger attorney who may not have the opportunity to appear in court or client meetings should consider their firm and more senior attorneys to be their audience. Younger attorneys should look to more senior attorneys for cues on how to dress and act professionally within the culture of that firm.

Attorneys also should be aware of their online professional presence. If a prospective client searches for you on the Internet, what will they find? Your biography should be easily accessible and convey any experience and awards which enhance your presence. Online biographies also should include something that makes you unique and that would make a client interested in hiring you over other attorneys. Make certain that you have authored articles, given

presentations or received awards that appear online and are relevant to your practice. Several corporate clients first contacted me in response to a particular reference in my online biography. Hiring me over other attorneys made sense to these clients, without ever meeting me in person, because my online presence was perceived to be credible and professional.

Lawyers also should make certain that any information posted online is consistent with their professional presence. Use caution in all online communications. A sarcastic statement can easily be misconstrued, and a misstatement can never be taken away, once sent out electronically.

Law students also need to be aware of the professional presence they communicate to prospective employers. I moderated a panel discussion on behalf of the Coalition of Women's Initiatives in Law Firms recently regarding professional presence. The purpose of the panel discussion was to provide advice to law students in order to help them further their own careers. The panel consisted of law firm partners and corporate counsel from the coalition.

Sixty students from area law schools attended the event. The law students were eager to hear what we, as more seasoned attorneys, had to say about what we looked for in terms of professional presence. Law students asked questions on topics such as protocol for online postings and blogs, wearing flip-flops to and from work (a definite no-no in the law firm world, according to our panel) and whether tights, nylons or bare legs were more appropriate. Although seemingly superficial, the questions and answers from our panel made clear that every aspect of our presence, both in person and in the virtual world, can play a powerful role in our ultimate success as attorneys.