

## The Firm Retreat as a Communications Tool

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From HBC's *Sound Bites Blog* ([www.hellermanbaretz.com/soundbites](http://www.hellermanbaretz.com/soundbites))

As HBC heads to its annual retreat this week, we're reminded of something we've said before.

No, it's not that firms should market their individual partners. You've heard us say that often, and we'll keep saying it as long as GCs "hire the lawyer, not the firm."

Today, we're talking about a caveat to our admonition above. Which is: While firms should market individual partners to their prospective clientele, that doesn't mean there is no place for the marketing of the firm as an institution. Indeed, firms should market themselves enthusiastically—to their own partners.

As John Hellerman [said in his article after the collapse of Howrey](#):

"Although law firms should not be marketed qua law firms to clients, they should be marketed that way to their partnerships and competitors' partnerships (i.e., the lateral market). This, too, is an often overlooked role for marketing and communications departments—and one that is evident in Howrey's demise.

"... Eli Lilly does not market Eli Lilly to its consumers, but it does market Eli Lilly to its current and potential shareholders—those that capitalize the company and those whose presence suggests confidence about its future. The partners of a law firm are not simply analogous to shareholders; in the case of incorporated firms, they are literally shareholders. And for all law firms, they are the audience to which the firm—as an institutional brand—is most relevant, and whose good opinion of the firm—as an institutional brand—is necessary to its continued success."

Our retreat reminds of this instruction, because firm retreats are an excellent venue for firms to market themselves, as an institution, to their partnerships. Here are a few practical ways firms can do that, beginning with the most important:

- Tell the partnership where you're going: For many firms, the last few years have not been the rosiest from a financial perspective. A little honesty goes a long way, however, and giving partners a transparent view of the firm's financial position will earn firm leadership great respect. When that information is combined with a clear view of where and how the firm is positioning itself for the future, there is a very good chance that the firm will be rewarded with a loyal partnership that isn't looking to jump ship.
- Tell the partnership where you've been: Retreats offer a great opportunity for firms to reinforce their history, culture, and values—and doing so to deepen the connection between individual partners and the firm. Communications teams (or outside partners like HBC) can play a valuable role in developing short, engaging retreat content that delves into the history of a global firm (many of which are fascinating and under-appreciated), or how its founding values live on in the present.
- Celebrate your successes: At the end of the year, many firms send their clients a communication letting them know about the outstanding work the firm has done over the last twelve months. That's

an excellent practice—and that news should be communicated to partners as well. Not only does it convey pride in the firm, but it also gives partners talking points for cross-selling the firm to their existing clients.

- Celebrate your benefits: Let's face it, the bottom line matters. A retreat is a great opportunity to remind partners of the benefits they enjoy at the firm—whether it's a review of the compensation system (and the reasoning behind it), a review of under-utilized benefits such as gym memberships, or the attractiveness of the firm's retirement plans. HR departments can be helpful in identifying the firm's most competitive benefit packages and offering perspective on how they stack up to those of competitors.

The retreat can be a great communications tool for your firms as an institution, so by all means use it.