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LEGAL PROFESSION

Learning Lessons From Lawyer Jokes

[Don't be upset – use them as a motivator to improve, and discredit their sting](#)

By Daniel E. Cummins
Of the Law Weekly

Lawyer jokes are an amusing, sometimes annoying, part of the practice. You've heard one, you've heard them all. With the negative sting of many of the lawyer jokes, it is easy to wince and give a wan smile while others laugh out loud with forced glee at the telling of such jokes.

Q: What's the problem with lawyer jokes?

A: Lawyers don't think they're funny, and no one else thinks they're jokes.

Unfortunately, it is said that jokes in general require some modicum of truth to help make them funny. The act of getting upset at being the brunt of such jokes may lend them credence and may only serve to foster the telling of lawyer jokes. Perhaps a better way to react to lawyer jokes is not to be upset by them, but rather to use them as a motivator to better your practice and thereby contribute to improving the image of attorneys as a whole.

Q: How do you get a group of lawyers to smile for a picture?

A: Just say, "Fees!"

A main complaint by the public with lawyers is the fees charged and the manner in which they are charged. One way to avoid such criticism is to, wherever possible, politely remind the client that the result they seek, or have obtained, may not have been realized without the legal expertise provided.

In other cases where a favorable result for the client is not likely, the better practice may require an attorney to be up front with clients early in the attorney-client relationship about the futility of their claim or defense. This may serve to streamline the case, result in a quicker resolution, and save the client money in the long run, thereby improving the reputation of the attorney in terms of fees saved as a result.

Another way to avoid client complaints regarding the fees charged is to provide detailed, itemized bills that fully describe the services rendered. Clients may also be better served, as well as attorney reputations, if the clients are not unnecessarily double billed in the form of multiple attorneys or staff working on a single task.

Where a dispute arises with the client over attorney charges, it may also be the better practice to immediately attend to client questions about a bill with a willingness to compromise hopefully being present on both sides of the issue. A satisfied client obviously may be a repeat client or a source of other referrals. Therefore, a squabble over a few dollars in a present matter may not be worth the cost of other cases that could be realized in the future.

Another proactive way lawyers may offset the negative public perception regarding attorney fees may be through giving back to the community. Donations to local charities, volunteering time at local fundraisers, and participating in pro bono legal work all serve to display attorneys in a better light.

Q: Did you hear about the lawyer hurt in an accident?

A: An ambulance stopped suddenly.

There is probably no more common complaint against attorneys than their sometimes voracious pursuit of new clients. Yet, in a competitive world with a glut of attorneys, it appears that seeking out clients and attorney advertising is a necessary evil to support one's practice.

Lawyers are commonly criticized for their rampant and sometimes crass advertisements and commercials. Perhaps a way to blunt such criticism is to instill more creativity into the advertising, maybe even humor, as opposed to the standard commercial of a somber attorney lamenting the woes of personal injuries and his or her ability to make all well again through a lawsuit.

One way to perhaps attract other clients is to include past clients in the advertising praising the positives of their experience with that attorney or firm. In this manner, rather than having the attorney patting himself on the back, the public will be hearing another member of the public speaking favorably of his or her experience.

In any event, attorneys should be mindful of the Rules of Professional Conduct 7.2 and 7.2 regarding "ambulance chasing" or direct contact with potential clients. Generally speaking, direct in-person solicitation of a prospective client by a lawyer is also frowned upon by the disciplinary board and should be avoided.

Q: What do you get when you cross a librarian with a lawyer?

A: All the information you need, but you can't understand a word of it.

Q: What do you get when you cross the Godfather with a lawyer?

A: An offer you can't understand.

Another common complaint about lawyers and legislators is their obstinate refusal to speak in plain, ordinary terms. Lawyers insist on using big words when little words would suffice [uh, when little words would do]. Legal jargon and Latin terms are still routinely used even though they should be avoided wherever possible when dealing with the public.

The problem of some lawyers refusing to utilize plain language has grown to the extent that awards are given out by the Bar when a lawyer is found to have fostered the use of plain English in his practice. So perhaps lawyer jokes in this regard can serve as a reminder to use plain English in our speech and writing whenever possible.

Q: How many lawyers does it take to change a light bulb?

A: None, they'd rather keep their clients in the dark.

Since the dawn of legal practice, clients have complained about the failure of lawyers to keep them apprised as to the status of their case. The problem had apparently more recently become so common that Rule of Professional Conduct 1.4 was promulgated which, in part, requires every attorney to "promptly comply with reasonable requests for information" and to otherwise "keep the client reasonably informed about the status of the matter."

Perhaps if attorneys strived to keep their clients informed with a call or a letter every thirty to sixty days, there would be one less 'how many lawyers does it take to change a light bulb' joke.

Q: "You seem to be in some distress," the judge said to the witness. "Is anything wrong?"

A: "Well, your Honor," said the witness, "I swore to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, but every time I try, some lawyer objects."

The lesson to take from this joke is to keep objections to a minimum at trial. By objecting only when truly necessary, an attorney may be able to avoid the public perception, by a jury no less, that the attorney is attempting to hide something, or worse yet, is a bully.

To prevent any adverse inferences by the jury to an objection, it may also be wise to give a short explanation for the basis of the objection. Giving this short explanation may not only explain to the jury the valid reason for the objection, but may also be crucial for properly preserving the objection as a basis for an appeal.

It may also be wise, whenever possible, to keep sidebar conferences with the judge to a minimum. Despite the best of instructions to a jury from a judge that sidebar conferences are a necessary part of a trial to deal with tangential issues, a jury will likely always feel that something is being kept from them and will also grow impatient with the delays caused by the conferences. The better practice may be to anticipate issues that may arise and address them with the court before the jury is brought into the room and put into the jury box.

Q: What's the difference between a good lawyer and a great lawyer?

A: A good lawyer knows the law. A great lawyer knows the judge.

This joke brings to mind scenes from *The Verdict* with Paul Newman and *A Civil Action* with John Travolta and Robert Duvall. In both of these movies, there is a pivotal scene in which the underdog lawyer is called into the judge's chambers only to find the more experienced opposing counsel already in chambers having a friendly *ex parte* chit-chat with the judge. While friendly and courteous relations are to be encouraged between lawyers and the bench, attorneys and judges should strive to avoid the perception of the public, and of out-of-town attorneys, of any favoritism once the matter gets underway.

Q: How many lawyer jokes are there?

A: Just three, all the rest are true.

Lawyer jokes have unfortunately been an undying breed since the time of Shakespeare. Even up to today, on any given week, Leno or Letterman will unleash a zinger against lawyers to the delight of their audiences. On the Internet, a simple Google search will reveal numerous web pages devoted to lawyer jokes.

While such jokes may never become extinct, their impact can be lessened by improved attorney conduct.

Unfortunately, lawyers are not always adept at displaying themselves in the best light possible, which is in part due to the adversarial and competitive nature of the practice. There will also always be some bad apples who will continue to highlight and foster a negative view of lawyers as a whole.

Yet, continued efforts by all members of the bar to better the image of lawyers through open and plain communication, professional and courteous behavior in the public eye, community service, and the zealous but sensible pursuit of justice on behalf of clients can all only serve to discredit the sting of lawyer jokes.