

Business of Law

The Coach: A year later: What does COVID-19 mean for you? Gary Mitchell

By **Gary Mitchell**

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(April 27, 2021, 8:41 AM EDT) -- It is now just a little over one year since the world, including the legal world, got kicked in the briefs. And yes, that pun was intended. From lockdown to opening up, then back and forth between different levels of restrictions, it's certainly been a challenging year. This column serves as a recap of what we have gone through, and some of what we can expect moving forward.

Disruption

COVID-19 is the largest global disruption in modern history. And what history tells us is that we are never going back to the way things were before, at least not completely.

Navigating disruption can be incredibly challenging. But it can also be exciting. It is not all bad. It inspires us to become more innovative and creative. It forces us to make changes and do things differently that we would not have likely done on our own, getting ahead of the curve and creating new products and services to help us cope with our new reality.

Just look at all the innovative stories of companies who changed their entire production model to provide plexiglass barriers for taxis, restaurants, banks etc. What about the distilleries who shifted from making alcohol to making hand sanitizer? It does not take much to look around at our new reality to see all the new products and services emerging.

So, what effect does this have on law firms?

Service

Obviously over the past several months you have been, for the most part, serving your clients remotely. Guess what? Everyone survived, right? I do not see this reverting back 100 per cent to in-person meetings with clients. I see this "virtual" meeting approach to at least be a part of your service model moving forward. That leads me into the next section.

Office space

While some smaller firms and solo practitioners continued to stay open, all the big firms, regional, national and international, almost completely shuttered their offices. It was quite amazing and something we have never seen before.

Here is the thing: Prior to the pandemic, most law firms fought hard against the idea of having staff and lawyers work from home. How could it work? Well guess what? The sky did not fall. People made it work. And from what I hear, a lot of people are enjoying working from home. The work is still getting done and the clients are still happy.

And this will also save firms incredible amounts of money in rent. I know of several national firms who prior to COVID-19 were looking to expand their spaces and have now put those plans on hold. Why expand into larger office spaces when more of your people are and will likely continue to work from home?

Moving forward we will continue to see a lot of people, both staff and lawyers, working the hybrid of working at the office and working from home. This leads me to the next section.

HR/staffing

With the option of working from home now on the table, this opens up a huge talent pool for law firms to draw on. Previously ignored, this pool of talent can and will prove to be highly valuable.

Here are just two of those scenarios. The single mom who needs to stay at home and be the caregiver for her children. Single moms with a lot of talent and experience.

The same is true for more senior practitioners who nearing the end of their careers, and not wanting to, or not allowed to work full time anymore, still have a lot of gas in the tank and vast experience and expertise to offer. Not to mention that more senior people are at a higher risk for contracting COVID-19, so it makes sense that they take all precautions necessary.

Marketing

Going forward we will not see the client events, conferences and such. No one can predict when or even if some of these marketing approaches will come back, and that includes me. I only wish I had the foresight to have invested in Zoom back in March of 2020. Everyone is using it, or similar platforms, like WebEx, including courts and governments.

Because it has proven so useful, convenient and far less expensive than travelling, do you think we will return everything to live events? I do not. Why would we when we have this cost-effective and far more convenient option? That includes all marketing efforts.

Business development

Business development traditionally has involved in-person meetings. And depending on where you live, the restrictions vary. In Vancouver, we just went backwards for the first time since slowly coming out of lockdown at the end of May last year. After enjoying much freedom, the government took away indoor dining. Other parts of Canada haven't been that lucky and haven't had indoor dining for months.

Although vaccines have started to be administered, just look at the news on any given day. It's clear that we are far from out of this.

So, look at your client and top contact list and pick up the phone or shoot them an e-mail and get out there. As we come into better weather, get out there and enjoy the patios. For your clients and prospects, this will be a real treat, and they will appreciate it more than ever before.

My father's favourite expression has always been, "It is what it is." In the end this is your choice. Do you want to bury your head in the sand, or do you want to leverage the changes, go with the new norm, and move forward?

What other opportunities are out there for you and your law firm?

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