

Chapter 5

Nine Reasons Your Law Firm Doesn't Need Your Surname

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MCLE FORM 1: Recordkeeping Form (Do Not Return This Form to the Bar)

Instructions:

Pursuant to MCLE Rule 7.2, every active member shall maintain records of participation in **accredited** CLE activities. You may wish to use this form to record your CLE activities, attaching it to a copy of the program brochure or other information regarding the CLE activity.

Do not return this form to the Oregon State Bar. This is to be retained in your own MCLE file.

Name:		Bar Number:	
Sponsor of CLE Activity: OSB Professional Liability Fund			
Title of CLE Activity: Law Firm Branding It's Not Your Logo It's Your Life		Program Number: 558*2197	
Date:	Location:		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Activity has been accredited by the Oregon State Bar for the following credit:</i> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1 General or Pract. Skills <input type="checkbox"/> Prof Resp-Ethics <input type="checkbox"/> Access to Justice <input type="checkbox"/> Abuse Reporting <input type="checkbox"/> Practical Skills <input type="checkbox"/> Pers. Mgmt/Bus. Dev.*	<input type="checkbox"/> Full Credit. <i>I attended the entire program and the total of authorized credits are:</i> <input type="checkbox"/> General <input type="checkbox"/> Prof Resp-Ethics <input type="checkbox"/> Access to Justice <input type="checkbox"/> Abuse Reporting <input type="checkbox"/> Practical Skills <input type="checkbox"/> Pers. Mgmt/Bus. Dev.*	<input type="checkbox"/> Partial Credit. <i>I attended _____ hours of the program and am entitled to the following credits*:</i> <input type="checkbox"/> General <input type="checkbox"/> Prof Resp-Ethics <input type="checkbox"/> Access to Justice <input type="checkbox"/> Abuse Reporting <input type="checkbox"/> Practical Skills <input type="checkbox"/> Pers. Mgmt/Bus. Dev.*	

***Credit Calculation:**

One (1) MCLE credit may be claimed for each sixty (60) minutes of actual participation. Do not include registration, introductions, business meetings and programs less than 30 minutes. MCLE credits may not be claimed for any activity that has not been accredited by the MCLE Administrator. If the program has not been accredited by the MCLE Administrator, you must submit a Group CLE Activity Accreditation application (See MCLE Form 2.)

Caveat:

If the actual program length is less than the credit hours approved, Bar members are responsible for making the appropriate adjustments in their compliance reports. Adjustments must also be made for late arrival, early departure or other periods of absence or non-participation.

*Personal Management Assistance/Business Development. See MCLE Rule 5.13 and Regulation 5.300 for additional information regarding Category III activities. Maximum credit that may be claimed for Category III activities is 6.0 in a three-year reporting period and 3.0 in a short reporting period.



Nine reasons your law firm doesn't need your surname

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💬 0 Comments

McLawsen Tower. McLawsen Grand Casino. McLawsen Steaks? My own surname doesn't lend quite the right panache. Not that I didn't have the opportunity. When my wife and I got married during grad school we reengineered our last name (merging Walsen and McCraw) and in retrospect could have gone with something catchier..

When it came to naming my immigration law firm, I didn't want my surname on the masthead. From the, start one of my goals was to build a client experience that was associated with my firm, [Sound Immigration](#), rather than myself personally.

Washington lawyers are permitted to use trade names, so long as they are not misleading. RPC 7.5, cmt. 1. While trade names were relatively unusual just a few years ago, they are now wide-spread. I spoke to my colleagues in the small practice community about why

they departed from the Surname Law Firm model, or why they wish they had.

(1) Distinct brand identity from the lawyer(s)

Use of a trade name can be the first step towards building a strong brand identity for a law firm. As Shreya Biswas Ley of [LayRoots](#) puts it, a trade name “projects an image of a company rather than a person.” For Shreya and her husband, who advise early-stage businesses,

we wanted to evoke an ethos around helping businesses and families lay solid roots for a successful business and future. We went with LayRoots because we were thinking of the huge oak trees in New Orleans where we went to law school and the fact that we love the outdoors.

(2) Ability to grow painlessly

If Surname, Attorney at Law ever wants to expand, she is going to have a challenge. Perhaps your new associate won't mind working in Surname's shadow. But a lawyer of equal stature in the community will probably also want equal billing on the letterhead. As IP attorney Mark Jordan ([Bracepoint Law](#)) puts it, “most importantly, I never want to get in an argument about whose name goes first on the letterhead.” That will mean at the very least a rebranding to tack on Surname II. Why not make things easier from the get-go?

Michelle Dellino was a law clerk colleague of mine at Kitsap Superior Court, and like me she opened her own firm after our clerkship. Now owner of the eponymous [Dellino Law Group](#), Michelle says in retrospect she would have done it differently.

When I started my practice I initially planned for it to be small, like a true solo practice and decided to use my own name “Dellino Law.” But quickly I realized that I wanted to take it in a different direction and began to treat it like for more of a business than just a solo practice and added the dba “Dellino Law Group.” If I had foreseen the growth trajectory initially and planned for a small firm rather than a solo practice I would have used a different name for branding.

(3) Brand stability

Brand stability is the flip side of the growth issue. It takes years for a law firm to gain standing in the community as a reliable and trustworthy provider of great legal services. Changing the firm's name brings the serious communication challenge of ensuring that folks know that You are still You (plus one or more as the case may be). As Loriann Miller ([Ardent Law](#)) points out, "I dislike that law firms change their names every time a partner changes." For that matter, Loriann points out, even if Surname Law Firm remains a one-lawyer shop, what happens when the lawyer gets married?

Name changes are confusing for a public and colleagues who don't devote much mental bandwidth to your business. Make it easier by sticking with a name that doesn't need changing.

(4) Communicate your niche.

Having entered the [era of the niche law practice](#), why not use your firm's name to communicate its niche? Amie Peters focuses on helping longshore workers with employment-related claims. In choosing the name [Blue Water Legal](#), Amie reasons: "My clients earn their livings on the water and they associate with this identity. It's makes it easier for them to call a firm that has a similar identity."

Naming choice may even positively impact the ever-important search engine rankings. It has long been "known" that Google favors website URLs that include a search term (note www.soundimmigration.com). It can't hurt to have a practice area featured not only in a URL but in the business name itself.

(5) Ability to sell

During his tenure as WSBA president, Steve Crossland ([Crossland Law Offices](#)) worked hard to raise awareness about the challenges of transitioning out of law practice. One common misperception amongst small practice attorneys is that they own a business worth selling, or rather worth buying. To vastly over-simplify insights shared by Steve and others, the closer a firm's identity and value is tied to a particular lawyer, the harder it will be to sell (i.e., the less market

value it has). While a distinct firm name by itself is certainly insufficient, it takes the firm in the right direction for being viewed as an entity. As Shreya (see above) puts it, “we wanted to have the option of creating a saleable asset, including a brand name, that isn't tied to me as an individual.” Also, IP lawyer, [Mike Matesky](#) points out that non-surname firms may have an easier time registering their name as a trademark.

(6) Leveling of perceived firm hierarchy

[LayRoot's](#) Shreya Ley makes another great point: surname-rich letterhead tells clients which of the attorneys are the best, or at least might be viewed that way. “We wanted to eventually transition clients to other attorneys who are working for the firm and not have the clients be upset that they're not receiving time with someone whose name isn't on the letterhead.” There might be strategic reasons to *encourage* precisely that perceived value differential. If partners are billing four times the rate of their associates, then the firm has to create a strong perception (and reality) that the partners are delivering greater value. But for firms like LayRoots and [my own](#) that operate largely on flat-rate billing, we have far less financial incentive to bolster the status of the firm's principals.

(7) Because surnames just don't work

As Mike Matesky puts it, “I knew that [Matesky Law](#) would be a distinctive firm name despite being surname-based, and I was not worried about any potential confusion with other Mateskys out there.” Other surnames might be difficult for your client base – or referral sources – to pronounce. Indian lawyer, [Ryan Dreveskracht](#) [sic] comes to mind for some reason.

(8) Tie-in to another business.

Devon Thurtle Anderson has a particularly interesting reason for choosing her firm's name, [Skepsis Legal Solutions](#). Devon was already running [Skepsis Technologies](#), which helps small businesses with bookkeeping and IT support. Because of ethical restrictions Devin needed to offer services under two different (virtual) roofs, but the similar names will help clients understand the complementary

offerings.

(9) Out with the old

Increasingly, using your surname is simply viewed as old school. Devon Thurtle Anderson says, “I feel like the firm-surname is an old model. It projects an image of practicing law in an older, more traditional way.” Likewise, Amie Peters says, “I saw using a family name as being old school. I left an old school firm to do things differently and it started with the name of my firm.”

Now there is nothing inherently wrong with being old school. Some practitioners may want to invoke the trappings of a traditional law practice. But like Devon and Amie, I want to communicate that my firm is taking a progressive approach to law practice.

A version of this post appears as an article in the newsletter of the King County Bar Association

Greg McLawsen



I'm proud to be the founder of Sound Immigration. My job is to work behind the scenes to ensure our clients have an outstanding experience at our firm. I'm passionate about reinventing the practice of law to make it work better for those we serve. I work hard to identify the best available technology to make our firm convenient for clients. I look to other industries, like real estate and the restaurant business, to learn about practice that will help serve our clients better.