



COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON LAW FIRMS' BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN PORTUGAL

It has been almost a year since law firms have felt the effects of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, for Iberian Lawyer wanted to understand and analyse how some of the biggest law firms in Portugal have reacted to these new challenges. The relevant professionals within these firms provided valuable commentary and insight into what has been happening behind closed doors.

by michael heron

CLIENT COMMUNICATION THE PRIORITY

“Particularly in the legal sector, personal relationships are paramount – both in our work and in business development”, says **Ana Craveiro**, director of Communication & Public Relations at **Morais Leitão**. She adds: “Trust is a fundamental characteristic in the attorney-client relationship, and it is greatly influenced by direct interaction. All our events and meetings became digital overnight. We immediately realised that clients needed our help in navigating legislation that was being enacted. We prepared a detailed guide that included all major sectors and shared it with our contacts. At the same time, we hosted daily webinars explaining the major impact of the coronavirus. Both actions were well received and perceived as fundamental – they created the opening for further interaction and confirmed that the firm continues to add value to our clients’ businesses.”

Matilde Horta e Costa Corporate affairs & Talent director at **VdA** is in agreement with the need to focus on providing clients with timely advice. “Our external communication focused on a solidary response towards our clients, stakeholders and the community. The pandemic raised complex and challenging legal issues with a profound impact on companies across different industries and on society at large, which made us commit from the get-go to sharing knowledge and experience that would help clients, stakeholders and the community navigate the new challenges.” She affirms: “We were the first law firm in Portugal that set up a multidisciplinary task force to follow up on these issues and relay daily information on a free digital platform on the measures adopted and their legal impacts both in Portugal and across the VdA Legal partners’ jurisdictions.”

Daniela Amaral, head of strategy and Business Development at **PLMJ**, expresses: “Our top priority as a firm was to reach out and be there for all our clients. We soon realised that this new situation added a personal dimension to what was once mainly a professional relationship, and this brought us even closer together. Everyone in the firm, be it our lawyers or our business services teams, have worked tirelessly to make sure our clients have had the latest information as early as possible.”



ANA CRAVEIRO



MATILDE HORTA E COSTA



DANIELA AMARAL



RITA CORREIA

Rita Correia, partner and responsible for the Business Development area at **Miranda & Associados**, highlights the same priorities but with a more international focus. “We set up a multijurisdictional COVID-19 support team in charge of identifying and promoting BD initiatives across the Miranda Alliance in close coordination with multi-practice subteams for each jurisdiction dealing with the main legal issues triggered by the pandemic, such as layoffs, tax and corporate restructuring and contractual force majeure issues. These teams proved to be quite efficient and a comprehensive way of raising awareness for new legal issues and their solutions.”



GUILHERME ZUZARTE

Guilherme Zuzarte, head of Business Development at **Abreu Advogados**, also focused on client communication and a specific pandemic reaction strategy: “As new challenges arose with the pandemic, our sharp attention and fast-adaptive teams were key to continue being valuable to our clients and as their primary contact when they most needed. Since uncertainty became part of the day-to-day business at all companies and physical distance mandatory, Abreu Advogados rapidly invested in its “Abreu Helpdesk |COVID-19” as the source of useful information to not only its clients but to all of those who felt helpless. It was especially important to the clients to continue feeling accompanied as before, a mindset that we described as ‘to keep proximity at a distance.’”



LEONOR CUNHA

Leonor Cunha, Marketing & Communication manager at **SRS Advogados**, points out that clients are at the forefront of their focus, “2020 was a challenging year for everyone and we were pessimistic about the impacts on the firm’s business. However, and despite our pessimism, the evolution of SRS’ business has been very similar to last year’s during the course of 2020 and the different phases of the pandemic. Our clients faced a myriad of issues during last year – and still do, but the firm sensed that the structural challenges facing labour restructuring processes and digital security were key. At SRS we tried to remain flexible and adjust to our client preferences. A successful content marketing strategy, creative thinking and new ways of communicating were key to maintain permanent, cohesive and constructive contact with clients and it was also a determining factor in attracting new clients.”

EMBRACING TECHNOLOGY

The most consistent theme regarding the response from firms to the pandemic has been the need to embrace technology quickly and effectively. Ana Craveiro says: “The first major change was going fully digital – a format that we quickly embraced and that is much more limited in terms of its impact than physical events and meetings. It is not our preferred option, but one that has become mandatory. As always, contact with clients is a priority, ensuring that we are present and available to help them through these unusual times, especially in terms of risks and opportunities. In terms of internal communication, we tend to communicate frequently with our lawyers and employees and have initiated several differentiated engagement strategies.”

Matilde Horta e Costa agrees with the importance of internal communication and technology and adds further insight: “In terms

of our internal communication strategy, we focused on three main concerns: Health, IT and Culture. The protection of all our staff and their families' health and well-being was our main concern. A communication plan regarding structured measures on health and safety, in line with government and WHO's official recommendations, was put in place through several initiatives, including daily guidelines on different impacted professional aspects. We also developed an active communication line on the IT tools available to ensure the follow-up of the activity. Informal team motivation and engagement campaigns and programs through collaborative digital platforms were implemented, and our induction program to follow up on more recent staff members was reinforced to help them with their integration." Daniela Amaral comments: "As expected, there was a strong shift to digital content and events, with an emphasis on content marketing and thought leadership materials. 2021 will still be a difficult year for the economy as a whole and our strategy will be to continue to use a combination of online and offline initiatives to target our clients' individual needs."

Ana Pinelas Pinto, partner, responsible for the Communications area at Miranda, went into further detail as to how the firm has used technology to expand their communication channels: "Our main challenge in 2021 is to maintain and diversify the tools for communication with clients and internally, within the Miranda Alliance. We will continue working on the projects and initiatives launched last year, such as the "Miranda Investing Beyond Borders podcast" (biweekly episodes about business, legal and regulatory news from around the 19 Miranda Alliance jurisdictions) and "Miranda TV" (short videos with relevant legal news about Miranda Alliance jurisdictions)."

Alexandra Almeida Ferreira, head of Communications and Public Relations at PLMJ, also highlighted the importance of a digital strategy: "The keywords for PLMJ's 2020 communication strategy – externally and internally – were #digital, #relevance and #content. In 2020, we went all-in with video and podcasts, both internally and externally. We are the first Portuguese law firm to have its own podcast – Podcast PLMJ. This serves as a legal knowledge hub, but also brings clients, C-level and academia insights on key growth sectors and trends. It is combined with artists from the PLMJ Foundation. But 2020 was not all about being online. We also launched PLMJ Stream, an initiative that is now part of the city's cultural offer, with concerts and talks. It started with a private concert by world-renowned pianist Maria João Pires and we are set to bring in other high-quality artists and new talent. In 2021 we are consolidating these initiatives. We are convinced that combining digital content and innovation that is relevant – in format and content – is the way to go."

Lourenço Ovídio, head of Brand and Communications at Abreu, outlined the importance of technology in both internal and external communication: "Aware of our role helping employees better adjust to the social fast-changing environment we released daily messages with the situation updates and guidelines together with suggestions for online courses, leisure activity, virtual gymnastic classes and online get-togethers. It was amazing to witness how our employees from different



ANA PINELAS PINTO



ALEXANDRA ALMEIDA FERREIRA



LOURENÇO OVÍDIO