

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

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



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."

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 a quite efficient and a comprehensive way of raising awareness for new legal issues and their solutions."

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, 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's 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 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 the "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 geographies could feel connected. Facing a fast-changing regulation environment, we were the first Portuguese firm to set-up an open page on our website, which we called "HelpDesk Covid-19", with daily updates not only for our clients but for everyone, with a clear and easy to read (non-juridical) wording, inviting the public to write to us, and releasing weekly webinars – the Abreu Forward Sessions." He adds: "Even before this pandemic, we were already using a multi-channel strategy, favouring digital ones, to meet several audiences, from our website news pages to social media such as LinkedIn, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter or even Slideshare and Spotify."

Leonor Cunha also stressed the importance of internal and external communication, "SRS Advogados as all the other firms, had to quickly adapt and ensure that through lockdown all our employees (lawyers and business services) had all the necessary conditions to proceed with their work with the minimum disruption possible so that the firm could maintain the quality of its legal service to all existing clients and also to new or potential clients. The drive was to have quality and accessible content to clients." She adds: "We implemented a microsite #SRSAAdvogadosCovid19Taskforce and provided legal information available to all. Internally, the firm also invested on reinforcing communication, and we implemented #SRSTogetherWorkingHealthy not only to disclose Covid-19 daily news but also tips on working remotely, how to lead the teams from home, we kept daily departmental/team video-meetings and every Friday a global video-meeting with our Managing Partner. We also implemented #SRSTalks, a special format to provide information on a monthly basis of what was happening with clients, peers and friends. In this context, we invited the managing partners of a US leading law firm, a leading city law firm and a leading Brazilian law firm to give their testimonials. We also had the honour of talks from Cardenal José Tolentino and José Gameiro, the experienced and famous psychiatrist."

2021 AND BEYOND

With the pandemic appearing to be slowing down but with no immediate end in sight, Iberian Lawyer posed the difficult question as to how the legal market in Portugal sees the future. Matilde Horta e Costa says: "We expect the profound changes accelerated by the 2020 pandemic context to consolidate into a 'new normal' in 2021. The authentic and close communication that is so characteristic of VdA, based on its strong culture, will remain as a key factor in keeping us close to our staff, clients, stakeholders and the community, incorporating new technologies and innovative

digital platforms that we have been developing."

Ana Craveiro concludes: "Email marketing and digital events must be used sparingly, according to the relevance of the matter at hand. That is, I believe, one of the secrets to survive pandemic digital fatigue. We acknowledge the overload and only intervene with added value."

Daniela Amaral says: Most of our clients have been with us for a long time, and this will not be the first crisis we have helped them recover from. Our focus for 2021 will be on helping our clients to prepare for recovery and come out even stronger on the other side."

Rita Correia is cautiously optimistic and says: "Our strategy has been to ensure a regular pace of online meetings and/or interactive workshops on new and practical legal developments with a clear impact on companies' businesses. We hope that this new routine is something to be looked forward by our clients and potential clients as a useful source of information and guidance. We plan to continue implementing this strategy during at least the first half of 2021. Given the current unpredictability of the COVID-19 situation we can only hope we will be permitted to diversify our BD initiatives sometime during the second semester of the year."

Guilherme Zuzarte explains: "Abreu Advogados ended the year 2020 with a growth in turnover of around 13%, with a growth of more than 18% in fees received and an increase of around 8% in human resources. As for 2021, Abreu Advogados will continue focusing on meeting client's expectations by being one step ahead of change."

Leonor Cunha wraps up by adding: "For 2021 we expect there to be a slow progression towards normality. There will be a continued focus on digital strategy, creative legal options and also a focus on the cost value of the service we are providing to clients. Our *2020-2025 strategic plan* remains in place and our vision on becoming a Portuguese top-5 leading law firm regarding both legal service and client care remains our top priority."

By Michael Heron

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