

LAWDRAGON

Righting Wrongs with Elizabeth C. Ortega of ECO Strategic Communications

By Sam Arman



In the arena of law, where a deal or case can move markets and shift policy, the public is always listening – and impactful communication is key. Elizabeth C. Ortega, communications strategist and trained therapist, brings her unique blend of emotional intelligence and legal acumen to the table as a marketer and PR professional. She's been refining her successful legal communications practice ever since she began it, some thirty years ago.

In June 2008, Ortega opened ECO Strategic Communications, a Miami-based international communications agency, specializing in helping law firms and professional service providers and their clients meet their business goals through sharp and intentional messaging and delivery. Ortega and her team of seasoned communicators, writers and designers offer a boutique blend of communications expertise and emotional understanding that helps to strengthen the client's brand on a global level. Ortega offers counsel on internal and external messaging, crisis and reputation management and mental fitness coaching.

"Litigation PR didn't have a name when I started doing it thirty years ago – it was all media relations," says Ortega. "Traditional media was king. Today, it's all about reputation as a core business function, brand maintenance and questioning the veracity of information."

Early on in her career, Ortega helped manage communications involving the second-largest Ponzi scheme in 2009. It was a high-profile case, and Ortega got a crash course on the power of shaping the narrative in real time. She and her team focused on delivering human, transparent messaging to victims. They innovated, by using online town halls long before they were common. The approach was not only bold and empathetic – it was transformative for her practice.

“We were to create a plan to communicate with the victims, many of whom were elderly and had lost their life savings,” says Ortega. “Talk about wanting to right a wrong! I did it the best way I know how: Our messaging was human, credible, factual and timely.”

Ortega has a refreshingly no-nonsense communication style. Her background as a trained therapist influences how she listens, questions, and supports clients – giving Ortega a unique edge in high-stress crisis situations. She uses diplomacy to soften the delivery, but make no mistake about it – Ortega is pragmatic. She’s tactful but direct, even if it’s uncomfortable.

“If a client has an ugly baby,” says Ortega, “it is my duty to tell the client the baby needs a hat and sunglasses to protect it from the glare of public scrutiny.”

Lawdragon: Will you describe for our readers the type of work you do with law firms?

Elizabeth C. Ortega: As a communicator, I collaborate with lawyers to set the record straight. Together with legal teams and their clients we define and direct the internal and external communications in response to a crisis. For example, corporate executives battling a hostile takeover in court find themselves fielding media inquiries. That’s where we come in to support the company’s public image and, most importantly, to safeguard employees.

Historically, litigators would suggest our collaboration, but nowadays savvy CEOs demand our inclusion as part of a comprehensive approach to setting the tone and seizing the narrative to inform the various stakeholders. With the proliferation of communication channels, including social media, litigation public relations is not only about media but about public perception and how messaging influences reputations.

LD: What first drew you to legal communications? What do you enjoy about it?

ECO: Ever since I can remember I wanted to be a lawyer. Eventually I learned that what I really wanted was the ability to protect people. I have this innate aspiration to right a wrong. Ultimately, I chose communications and founded a communications agency as my way of contributing to righting wrongs and protecting reputations. My professional focus has evolved over the years, as any business does to compete, but my resolve to understand and clarify clients’ objectives has only deepened.

On a daily basis, I enjoy sparring with professionals to define their “how” behind their “why.” In client meetings, I find that by listening and prodding clients, they often relate

instinctively and spot the answers for themselves. We know that we need to establish the “why” before we can move forward. When shaping a narrative, public perception is everything. These intense and high-energy interactions proactively create value.

LD: What do you like most about working with lawyers?

ECO: Lawyers are whip smart. They hate to be wrong and to lose. Most of the lawyers I know are top-notch and they work their fingers to the bone because that’s what it takes to prevail. Leave no stone unturned. I know we’re striving for the ephemeral balance of life and work, always mindful of mental wellness. While there’s the occasional respite, the reality is that the law is always competitive and demanding. That means our collective goals are fully aligned as we aim to manage and mitigate the impact of the crisis at hand.

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LD: Is there a particular PR or marketing campaign that stands out in your career as a “favorite” or especially memorable?

ECO: I hung out my shingle in 2008 and in 2009 we were tapped to work on the second-largest Ponzi scheme at that time. We were to create a plan to communicate with the victims, many of whom were elderly and had lost their life savings. Talk about wanting to right a wrong! I did it the best way I know how: Our messaging was human, credible, factual and timely. We had many highpoints but one stands out. We hosted various online townhall meetings at a time where that wasn’t a thing. These webinars, attended by the liquidators, lawyers and myself, gave us an opportunity to connect with the creditors in real time. We delivered the news as quickly, efficiently and openly as possible.

LD: How has legal communications changed since you first entered the field?

ECO: Litigation PR didn’t have a name when I started doing it thirty years ago. It was all media relations. Traditional media was king. Today, it’s all about reputation as a core business function, brand maintenance and questioning the veracity of information. Now you align communication goals by clearly identifying and articulating a shared vision supported by business objectives. Here’s my go-to formula: Goal – clarification is key; coaching and questioning. Resources – who, when and where. Build on what is working – repeat effective tactics. If it’s not broken, don’t fix it.

LD: What are your thoughts on AI in legal marketing and communications?

ECO: AI is a fantastic tool that is quickly freeing us up to do exclusively what we're intended to do: think. Do you remember the engineer to whom Henry Ford paid \$10K? The engineer charged \$1 for turning a screw and \$9,999 for knowing which screw to turn. The thing is, I don't know what AI would do in a crisis. Here's what I, as a veteran communicator, would do in response to a time-sensitive situation: grab a pen and paper, research, question – using methods including large-language models and chatbot exchanges – consider, weigh options, listen, understand. I wouldn't rush. I wouldn't hallucinate. I wouldn't guess. I would move forward deliberately to seize the narrative early because that's what sticks in people's minds.

LD: What advice would you give to lawyers or law firms who are considering hiring a PR professional for an upcoming case?

ECO: By shaping an authentic and strategic narrative, you bolster your client's reputation and become a trusted counselor. After decades of working in strategic communications, here's what I know should happen in the first 24 hours of a crisis: 1) Get the most senior people in a room. 2) Find out what you know and don't know about what happened. 3) Identify resources and determine next steps.

LD: How would you describe your style in legal marketing and communications?

ECO: Direct. I am an American who's often collaborating with wide-ranging international teams, so I'm direct and to the point. If a client has an ugly baby, it is my duty to tell the client the baby needs a hat and sunglasses to protect it from the glare of public scrutiny.

LD: Aside from your work, what makes you feel fulfilled?

ECO: Giving back. I've taught law students about strategic communications. Most recently, in connection with a global organization I co-founded, I sponsored underprivileged students to continue studies of financial crime solutions. As a trained therapist, I volunteered at a homeless shelter, where I led individual and group sessions. My commitment to community is about listening in order to understand, finding clarity and exercising responsibility.



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