

Setting the Tone

My first-grader is learning how to read with inflection. This step in the reading process has entertained our family. It is interesting (and comical) to hear how my son will emphasize certain words and how his voice will go up an octave when he is reading a sentence that ends with a question mark. I've had to remind him that achieving that perfect tone can be difficult.

This got me thinking about my own writing and reading of legal documents and work communication. I still read and reread letters many times in an attempt to decipher the sender's tone. I find it even more challenging to draft a letter with a tone that truly expresses my intended meaning. No matter if the recipient is opposing counsel, the judge, or one of my partners, I strive to achieve a balance of confidence and professionalism. A well-written letter, motion, or brief has

an attitude of authority and credibility; you don't necessarily have to quote the "golden-ticket" case, although that never hurts.

Those who know me well know that I am "challenged" when it comes to technology. I was *very* slow to move from my perfectly fine flip phone to a smartphone with all the bells and whistles. A large part of my reluctance was that I had not the faintest clue of how to operate such a high-tech contraption, and there was a small part of me that didn't want to receive text messages in all capital letters, decode abbreviations, or learn when to use a hashtag. The list goes on. And now emoticons have replaced words.

I find that technology has not only allowed for constant accessibility but also has created a feeling that we must respond to messages immediately.

Often, that rushed reply lacks the tone that we hoped to have had. Think about it: how many times have you replied to a lengthy email with a curt, one-word answer like "Yes" or "No"? I hate to admit that I've been guilty of this very thing, and I cringe to think of what the receiver has to think about my "detailed" response. I can hear my mother saying, "It is not just what you say, but how you say it." And I find myself realizing more and more these days, *Mom was right*.

Tone is limited to not just writing. In everything we do—from having a phone conversation with a client to arguing a summary judgment motion—our voice, our body language, and our accompanying actions can set the mood. For many people, their first and only glimpse into the legal profession is based on an attorney in a television show or movie. I've never understood why we are so often portrayed as lying, cheating villains, because in reality I've had the opposite experience. I wanted to become an attorney because I found that the lawyers in my small town were actively working to make the community better.

The Texas Young Lawyers Association is attempting to improve our society while also helping change the public's perception of lawyers by participating in multiple service events during the month of November. We have attorneys volunteering to build a home with Habitat for Humanity, participating in a 20-plus-mile walk to raise money to end child abuse, taking part in wills clinics, and encouraging high school students to register to vote.

The message is simple: attorneys care about their communities. And the tone is easy to understand.

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