

When Young Lawyers Look Young – Building Credibility with Clients, Jurors, and Judges

By Daniel G. P. Marchese

It happens just about every time they round the corner to enter my office. I immediately notice it in their eyes. They look up, do a double-take, and then I need at least fifteen minutes to get them back off the ledge. Some will not take their coats off. I can see their thoughts coming out of their heads like comic-book bubbles: “I’m gonna trust this kid?” “My life is in the delivery boy’s hands?” “What, am I so cheap that I’ve got to resort to being represented by one of the Jonas Brothers?”

These clients are reacting to seeing me for the first time. That’s right. I’m almost 39. I have been practicing law for nearly twelve years, and look like I just stepped out of my high school prom picture. While I don’t quite need a parent to go on the rides at Six Flags, I do not look like the seasoned attorney that clients often expect—think F. Lee Bailey. Clients can be leery of a lawyer with a full head of hair and modern style of dress. But that is me. I work alone. I don’t have a silver-haired partner or assistant to assuage fears and assure nervous new clients that I am the one who can carefully, but firmly handle their legal matters.

Some would say, “What’s so bad about looking young?” But what if looking young hurts my chances of being hired to represent a client? Especially in places like New Jersey, where I live, that are saturated with lawyers, competition for clients can be fierce. Appearance and initial impressions matter.

However, there are ways to work around having a youthful appearance. For example, after seven years of practice obtained a Civil Trial Certification designation from the New Jersey Supreme Court. Only 1,500 of the 83,000 attorneys in New Jersey have this designation. This feather in my cap sets me apart from the average young lawyer. It gives me instant credibility in marketing my skills to prospective clients.

Another way to win over clients—one that actually capitalizes on your youth—is to take advantage of your familiarity with technology. I always ask my clients if they would mind if I corresponded with them by e-mail or text message. Most welcome the offer. I can respond to e-mails and texts anywhere. I give my clients instantaneous attention. Of course, I am always careful to protect my clients’ privacy when using mobile devices. My clients often come to expect this level of attention and are grateful for it. Indeed, communicating in this way can show that you are quick to act, but thoughtfully decisive at the same time, two traits that clients want and expect out of a more seasoned lawyer. Communicating with clients via e-mail and text message also enables me to develop a rapport with clients and to gain their trust in my legal skills before they can jump to negative conclusions about my junior-looking appearance.

Unfortunately, one place where your youthful appearance can hurt you is the courtroom. The youthful-looking attorney very often comes across before a judge as a wisenheimer. That is why there is no excuse for not being well prepared in court. Kill with kindness, but maraud with a command of your case and the supporting law. Judges eventually will respect you for your intellect, insight, and forceful, but measured and polite, demeanor. You also can build a positive reputation in court by rubbing elbows with local judges at bar functions. Of course, do nothing improper or unethical; simply show them your human side. You might get the benefit of the doubt in future courtroom appearances.

In the end, your attitude and case results will win over a client, despite your youthful exterior. Truly, the best compliments I receive are referrals from existing clients who I have convinced of my worth—something that stretches beyond my “young” years.

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