

5 Ways Lawyers Can Earn Back The Public's Trust

By **Carl Taylor** (August 15, 2025, 3:02 PM EDT)

Public trust in the legal system is eroding, and not just because of unfavorable outcomes. Lawyers' actions are shaping public perception in ways we can no longer ignore.

Just in June, salacious headlines about lawyers — concerning, for instance, the sentencing of once-revered plaintiffs lawyer Tom Girardi for running a Ponzi scheme with his clients' funds, and the resentencing of celebrity attorney Michael Avenatti for embezzling settlement funds — captured the public's attention.[1]

"Avenatti has done many noble and good things in his life, some reflected in this case, but he's also done great evil for which he must answer," said U.S. District Judge James V. Selna at Avenatti's resentencing hearing. "His actions in this case ... show an abandonment of some of the most basic principles of fairness." [2]

And, in sentencing Girardi, U.S. District Judge Josephine Staton said, "Lawyers have great power and great discretion in our society. ... They sometimes forget that they can be held to account."

When cases like these make headlines, the quiet, ethical work of thousands of lawyers is eroded. Perception is nine-tenths of the law. If we hope to transcend tired jokes about lawyers, we must first rebuild trust.

A January Gallup poll found that only 17% of Americans viewed the honesty and ethical standards of lawyers as high or very high,[3] while a third of respondents rated their honesty and ethics as low or very low.

Judges scored modestly better, with 28% of respondents rating judges' honesty and ethical standards as high or very high, but even judicial faith is eroding — that 28% figure represents a 10% decline in just the past few years.

And a December 2024 Gallup poll found that Americans' faith in the judicial system is at 35%, down from 59% just a few years earlier.[4]

These numbers are not just bad PR; they are a direct threat to the legal system and the professionals who sustain it. This is not only because the number of pro se parties in civil litigation is increasing by percentage of the total docket, thus taking away work traditionally performed with representation,[5] but also because clients who lack trust in attorneys are more likely to pursue questionable malpractice



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claims[6] or ethics complaints,[7] or to otherwise refuse to accept legal advice.

Lawyers cannot serve as trusted advisers if there is no trust.

If we want to fix this, we must change our culture, not just our branding. The following five key strategies can help change legal culture and increase client trust.

1. Lead courtroom culture from the bench.

Judges are an integral part of how the public perceives the legal system, but they also play a role in the public's perception of lawyers. When judges interrupt, roll their eyes at or act sarcastically toward attorneys in open court, they may inadvertently teach the public that attorneys are not worthy of respect.[8]

The best judges are patient with attorneys and pro se litigants alike. By affording dignity to all who enter their courtroom, they foster mutual respect.

I have seen such judges move calendars efficiently not by rushing, but by taking the time to fully understand the case. Such judges can help facilitate settlements that litigants may otherwise be unwilling to stomach.

2. Focus on marketing that builds authority and professionalism.

Lawyer marketing should build trust, not erode it. That means prioritizing clarity over cleverness, insight over gimmicks and narrative over noise. The goal is not to shout louder; it is to speak with earned authority.

The best marketing does not chase attention — it earns respect. It reflects the same qualities we admire in great lawyers: thoughtfulness, precision and a deep understanding of the human stakes behind every case.

In other words, attorneys need to pursue authority. I define authority with the following equation:

Authority = Expertise + Narrative + Authenticity

If we fail to own the professional narrative about ourselves and our practices, then others will be quick to fill in the gaps. And we can assume they will be far less charitable. It will take much more than pro bono work, especially bar-mandated legal work, to restore the public's trust.

We need to control the narrative and operate from that narrative inside out. Part of that is authenticity shaped by vulnerability and humanity, discussed more below.

True authority is built on marketing efforts such as writing articles and original blog posts aimed at educating the public, hosting seminars, and even authoring books that help improve access to justice.

3. Practice emotional intelligence, and tap into your humanity.

Repairing our public image begins in conference rooms, and specifically during initial consultations. That starts with the following strategies:

- Listen actively in initial consultations, which should be long-form and conducted by attorneys, not artificial intelligence or nonattorney staff.[9]
- Integrate emotional intelligence into practice. Emotion enhances critical thinking and improves client trust.[10] This means reading tone and body language, pausing instead of reacting, asking clarifying questions before offering advice, and recognizing when client fear, rather than facts, is driving urgency. Attorneys who practice with empathy help calibrate their cases and their clients to the mission.
- Embrace transparency. This means admitting professional limits and collaborating when needed. Doctors do it; so should we.

And yes, this all means embracing not just humanity, but at times, vulnerability — a word that makes many attorneys recoil, but is essential for building trust. Embracing vulnerability as an attorney does not mean weakening your professional image or oversharing. It means being willing to admit when a case carries uncertainty, acknowledging limits when appropriate and being emotionally present in the room.

This shift from aloof technician to present human being is where real authority and true empathy begin.

4. Modernize continuing legal education for the AI era.

Enough with the "Top 10 Changes in Tax Law" panels. In an age of AI prompts, CLEs must provide dynamic value. You can ask ChatGPT to summarize the top 10 changes in an area of law while sitting at home on your back deck, sipping lemonade.

Let us pivot to more dynamic, empathy-based presentations highlighting, for example, the best of our profession, such as the attorneys who helped fight for the Civil Rights Movement and continue to fight for progress. We should move away from dry lectures, and instead incorporate roundtable discussions, free-flowing Q&A's with different types of experts, and even MFA-style writing seminars.

If we hope to restore public trust in the law, we must start with our CLEs.

You might ask: Don't CLEs just affect attorneys and not the public? That is the point. CLEs are one of the few structured, mandatory venues where lawyers are required to sit down and listen.

They are a built-in equalizer: Solo attorneys and BigLaw partners alike are required to attend. Unlike bar association panels or optional events, CLEs are compulsory. If we want to change the profession's tone, outlook and trustworthiness, we must start here.

Content shapes culture. Right now, our continuing education is stuck in a different century. It is time it caught up to the age of AI, storytelling and public skepticism. We must shift our own perception before we can shift that of the public.

5. Reform legal system injustices that undermine trust.

We cannot lose sight of the bigger fight against systemic unfairness. Attorneys face another uncomfortable fact: We work within the system, yet the system often fails to reward — or actively silences — those who speak out against injustice, challenge unethical behavior or push for reform.

Regardless, when we witness systemic unfairness, we must confront it. Lawyers have all too often been

taught to work within systems, not to challenge them.

Where the system unfairly grinds down individuals or classes of litigants, we must consider acting through bar associations, lawsuits or whatever means are available to restore access to justice.

We must also take reasonable positions that do not prolong transactions and litigation, thus further eroding faith in our system.

Where We Go From Here

If there is one silver lining to this crisis of trust in our legal system, it is this: We may have finally reached the point where honest self-examination is possible. It will take uncomfortable conversations and humility. It will likewise require legal marketing that cuts through the noise and distinguishes itself, and our profession, through authority-building assets.

But the payoff will be enormous: a profession worthy of its promise to serve as the defenders of the downtrodden and the exulted alike, leveling the playing field and ensuring justice for all.

If we remember that promise, the public may begin to see us once again, not as punchlines or punching bags, but as stewards of justice. And not even a few bad actors will be able to meaningfully shift that perception.

That future starts now.

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[1] LA Times, "Former celebrity lawyer Michael Avenatti gets nearly eight more years in prison at resentencing," June 12, 2025. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-06-12/michael-avenatti-resentenced>.

[2] Id.

[3] Gallup, Americans' Ratings of U.S. Professions Stay Historically Low <https://news.gallup.com/poll/655106/americans-ratings-professions-stay-historically-low.aspx> (January 2025).

[4] Gallup, Americans Pass Judgment on Their Courts (December 2024) <https://news.gallup.com/poll/653897/americans-pass-judgment-courts.aspx>. Public confidence in the U.S. Supreme Court and judiciary hit near record lows in recent years.

[5] Self-Represented Litigation Network, "About SRLN," accessed July 21, 2025. <https://www.srln.org/node/21/about-srln>. The SRLN notes that "an increasing number of people are coming to court without lawyers."

[6] Liberty Mutual Business Insurance, "Industry Disruptions Drive Surge in Legal Malpractice Claims," accessed July 21, 2025. <https://business.libertymutual.com/insights/industry-disruptions-drive-surge-in-legal-malpractice-claims>.

[7] New Jersey Supreme Court – Office of Attorney Ethics, "2023 Annual Attorney Ethics Report," published March 25, 2024. <https://www.njcourts.gov/sites/default/files/attorneys/office-of-attorney-ethics/oae-report-2023.pdf>.

[8] <https://therobingroom.com/home> Notably the "top 10" rated federal judges are all near 5.0 out of 5.0 scores, while the "bottom 10" are near 1.0, showing that judicial perception is real and impactful.

[9] Mary E. Vandenack, Law's New First Impression: Transforming Client Intake, L. Prac. Mag., Mar./Apr. 2025, https://www.americanbar.org/groups/law_practice/resources/law-practice-magazine/2025/march-april-2025/laws-new-first-impression-transforming-client-intake/.

[10] Catherine C. Kelton, Clients Want Results, Lawyers Need Emotional Intelligence, 63 Clev. St. L. Rev. 459 (2015), <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clevstlrev/vol63/iss3/6>.