

Do Seasoned Lawyers Discriminate Against Spring Chickens?

by Claire Been



I look young. It's a blessing and a curse. I get carded all the time. People who are with me get carded just because they are with me. And I guess I look young because, well, I am pretty young. The phrase "I have been practicing longer than you have been alive" has been jokingly bantered about on more occasions than I care to count.

It didn't really bother me until one morning when I was volunteering at the Housing Justice Project, a King County Bar Association clinic for tenants facing eviction. I sat down with my first client of the morning and began to ask her about her situation. A few sentences in, she paused: "How old are you? Are you even 30?" "No," I smiled. "I'm 27." I asked her another question, shaking my annoyance off. A few more sentences in, she stopped me again: "How long have you been practicing law?" "A little over a year," I said. "But I've been working with tenants at this clinic the whole time."

Our conversation progressed, but I was fuming inside. "Who does this lady think she is? I'm so sorry your free lawyer is only 27. Maybe it'd just be better to go it on your own, with all your extensive legal experience, rather than trust your fate to my measly three years in law school, successful bar passage, and one year practicing law." I think I eventually ended up negotiating an extended move-out date for her, and our representation ended on a positive note. But it left me with a bad taste in my mouth. How many other clients, opposing counsel, judges, and even my own colleagues think the same thing, but are just too polite to say it?

How do you handle being young and inexperienced, besides simply practicing for years and getting older? I don't want to wait that long! Should I be praying for grey hair and wearing matronly suits to disguise my youthfulness? That doesn't feel like a good solution, because you can't really disguise a youthful face. Well, I think there are some strategies that can help.

1. Use strong rhetoric. Being articulate and well-spoken goes a long way towards coming across as more mature. Youthful words such as "um" and "like" have to go.



Try to phase out words that seem emotional like "feel," "hope," and "love." Try to be less ambivalent. If you are giving an answer to a partner, try "I recommend" instead of "maybe..." Speaking with more clarity and conviction communicates confidence. Of course, the most sophisticated language in the world won't help you if you speak quietly to the floor. Tone of voice and body language are huge in terms of conveying confidence. Consider practicing or even taking a speech class if this is an issue for you. We don't want to deal with our weaknesses, but these are the skills that need the most attention.

2. Practice confidence. Being a young lawyer can be scary because you don't have a lot of experience, yet the advice you are giving can have a huge impact on your client's case, future, freedom, wallet, etc. It is personally difficult for me to "fake it" and be confident about something when I don't know the answer. For me, confidence comes from being very well prepared and well researched. It is OK to make a recommendation but explain why it is contingent on certain facts or further investigation. Both clients and partners appreciate this more than someone who is wishy-washy. It is also all right to say that you don't know the answer but will consider the

matter and get back to them. This straightforward response has saved me many times.

3. Be professional in your appearance. This is an awkward topic, but suffice it to say, take a good hard look and be honest about whether your appearance and dress is professional. You don't need to try to dress like you are middle-aged, but your appearance should not detract from the professional image you are trying so hard to cultivate. This includes cultivating your online appearance. You probably should switch that profile pic from your Cabo trip to something with nice scenery, or maybe you and your dog.

4. Add value. Ultimately, if you do a good job and get good results for your clients, no one will care how old you are. Work hard to be good at your job, and professional respect will follow.

5. Be enthusiastic. I have found this to be a huge asset. I actually like my job. I am not yet jaded and bitter (although I'm already getting sick of the billable hour...). As a young professional, energy and enthusiasm is an advantage. Your clients and colleagues will appreciate your positive outlook and go-getter attitude.

6. Be proud of your story. Ultimately, I have tried to embrace my youth as a positive factor. Instead of being ashamed of being a 27-year-old lawyer, I am proud of it. It's a challenging career path and I am glad to have come as far as I have in a short time. I have a long career ahead of me and I have come to terms with the fact that right now I won't know how to do everything right. Even 10-year or 20-year lawyers are constantly learning new things about the law, advocacy, clients, and marketing.

Finally, if you are in private practice, don't forget your number-one asset: your low, low billing rate! Your clients are getting excellent legal service at a bargain rate. You are the least expensive attorney on the block, so don't let your clients or potential clients forget it. ♦

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