



Ohio Board of Professional Conduct

OPINION 2026-02

Issued June 5, 2026

Use of a Separately Registered Trade Name or DBA by a Law Firm

SYLLABUS: An Ohio law firm organized as a limited liability company, limited liability partnership, or other permissible legal entity may use a separately registered trade name or fictitious name (DBA) in marketing, advertising, signage, and public-facing communications without appending the required entity designation to every instance of the trade name, provided that the full legal entity name, including the entity designation, is disclosed within the same medium in which the trade name appears, such as in the footer of letterhead, websites, and printed advertisements.

This nonbinding advisory opinion is issued by the Ohio Board of Professional Conduct in response to a prospective or hypothetical question regarding the application of ethics rules applicable to Ohio judges and lawyers. The Ohio Board of Professional Conduct is solely responsible for the content of this advisory opinion, and the advice contained in this opinion does not reflect and should not be construed as reflecting the opinion of the Supreme Court of Ohio. Questions regarding this advisory opinion should be directed to the staff of the Ohio Board of Professional Conduct.



Ohio Board of Professional Conduct

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APPLICABLE RULES: Prof.Cond.R. 7.5

QUESTION PRESENTED:

Whether a law firm organized as a limited liability company or other designated entity that has registered a trade name or fictitious name (DBA) with the Ohio Secretary of State must append the entity designation (e.g., "LLC") to every public use of that trade name in marketing, advertising, and public-facing communications.

ANALYSIS:

Background

Ohio law firms may be organized under a formal legal entity name that includes a corporate legend or descriptive designation (entity designation) as required by Prof.Cond.R. 7.5 and Gov.Bar R. III. Law firms may also register a separate DBA or trade name with the Ohio Secretary of State for use in firm marketing and on websites, letterhead, printed advertisements, business cards, and signage.

Prof.Cond.R. 7.5 and the 2020 Rule Amendment

Prior to June 17, 2020, Prof.Cond.R. 7.5 prohibited lawyers or law firms from practicing under a trade name. The Supreme Court of Ohio amended Prof.Cond.R. 7.5, effective June 17, 2020, which removed the prohibition. As a consequence, a lawyer or law firm may permissibly practice under a trade name in lieu of a traditional firm name that includes the name or surnames of a lawyer or lawyers in the firm, as long as the trade name complies with the Rules of Professional Conduct and the Rules for the Government of the Bar. *See* Adv. Op. 2020-11.

Prof.Cond.R. 7.5 requires that the name of a professional corporation or association, legal clinic, limited liability company, or limited liability partnership “contain symbols indicating the nature of the organization as required by Gov.Bar R. III.” Gov.Bar R. III(2) requires that the name of a legal professional association or legal clinic end with the legend “Co., LPA” and that the name of a corporation, limited liability company, or limited liability partnership include a descriptive designation as required by R.C. 1701.05(A), 1706.07, or 1776.82, respectively.

Advisory Opinion 2020-11

Adv. Op. 2020-11 addressed a law firm that “intends to be formally identified by the use of a trade name.” The opinion defined a trade name as “a name, style, or symbol used to distinguish a company, partnership, or business (as opposed to a product or service); the name under which a business operates.” Citing Black’s Law Dictionary (11th Ed., 2019.) The Board held that a firm using a trade name as its formal legal name must include a corporate legend or descriptive designation. For instance, if a law firm decides to operate as a limited partnership and wishes to use the trade name “The Polaris Firm,” it must ensure the proper entity designation is included. In this case, the full legal entity name should read “The Polaris Law Firm Co., LPA.” The 2020 advisory opinion did not expressly address the question presented here in which a law firm uses a separately registered trade name or DBA as a secondary marketing name.

Prior to the Supreme Court’s 2020 amendment of Prof.Cond.R. 7.5, Board staff provided written guidance in a staff opinion letter on the application of Prof.Cond.R. 7.5(a) and Gov.Bar R. III to law firm logos and abbreviated firm names in marketing communications. (Board Staff Letter 6/19/2015). Staff advised that a unique firm logo, using only letters, graphics, or a shortened name of the firm may forgo the entity-

designation requirement, so long as the letterhead, website, advertisement or marketing material using the logo visibly displays in another location the full name of the firm with the corporate legend or descriptive designation. The staff letter's guidance is directly relevant to the question at issue because it addresses the practice of law firms using a name other than their formal legal entity name in marketing and communications.

Based on the foregoing, the Board concludes that a law firm may use a separately registered trade name or DBA in marketing, advertising, signage, and public-facing communications without appending the entity designation to every instance of the trade name, provided that the full legal entity name, including the required entity designation, is disclosed within the same medium in which the trade name appears, such as in the footer of letterhead, websites, and printed advertisements. Below are usage examples and guidance to help ensure compliance with Prof.Cond.R. 7.5 and Gov.Bar R. III.

Websites. The trade name may appear in the header, logo, or other prominent location without the corporate legend or description designation appended. The full legal entity name with the required entity designation should appear in the footer or another visible location on the website.

Letterhead. The trade name may appear as the prominent firm identifier on letterhead. The full legal entity name with entity designation should appear elsewhere on the letterhead, such as in the address block or footer.

Printed Advertisements. The trade name may be used as the advertised firm name. The full legal entity name with the entity designation should appear in the footer or another visible location within the same advertisement.

Business Cards. The trade name may appear as the primary firm identifier on business cards. The full legal entity name with the entity designation should appear somewhere on the card, most likely in the address or contact information.

Articles, Blog Posts, and Web Content. The first reference to the firm in any article, blog post, or web content should use the full legal entity name with the entity designation. All subsequent references in the same piece may use the trade name alone.

Signage. Given space and design limitations, a law firm's exterior or interior signage may display the trade name without entity designation.