

Final

Rhode Island Supreme Court Ethics Advisory Panel Op. 2026-02 Issued March 12, 2026

FACTS

The inquiring attorney intends to form a new law firm with a law partner. The firm will operate primarily as a “digital” law firm, with a practice focusing on transactional legal matters—principally, contract drafting and review and related advisory services. The inquiring attorney and his or her law partner wish to name the firm “Contract House LLP,” but are unsure whether this name comports with the Rules of Professional Conduct.

ISSUE PRESENTED

Does the proposed law firm’s name comport with the Rules of Professional Conduct?

OPINION

It is the Panel’s opinion that the proposed law firm’s name does comport with the Rules of Professional Conduct.

REASONING

Firm names are governed by Rule 7.5:

(a) A lawyer shall not use a firm name, letterhead or other professional designation that violates Rule 7.1. A firm name used by a lawyer in private practice shall not imply a connection with a government agency or with a public or charitable legal services organization, shall not be comparative, or suggestive of the ability to obtain results, and shall not otherwise violate Rule 7.1. Law firm names that are misleading as to the identity of the attorney or attorneys practicing law with the firm are prohibited.

(b) Identification of the lawyers in a law firm shall indicate the jurisdictional limitations on those not licensed to practice in Rhode Island.

(c) The name of any lawyer who assumes a full-time judicial, legislative, executive or administrative office shall not be continued in the law firm name during any significant period in which he or she is not actively and regularly practicing with the firm; nor shall the name of any attorney whose employment, membership, or partnership has been terminated be continued in the name of the law firm except as provided herein. The name of a lawyer who is disbarred or suspended from the practice of law for a period of at

least six (6) months, shall not be used in the name of a law firm or in communication on its behalf.

(d) Lawyers may state or imply that they practice in a partnership or other organization only when that is the fact. Use of additional identifying language such as “Group” or “and Associates,” and the like, may be included in a law firm name only when such language is accurate and descriptive of the law firm.

“Rule 7.1 of the Rules of Professional Conduct prohibits firm names, letterhead, and all communications about a lawyer’s services from being false or misleading.” Rhode Island Supreme Court Ethics Advisory Panel Op. 2008-01. A communication is false or misleading if it:

(a) contains a material misrepresentation of fact or law, or omits a fact necessary to make the statement considered as a whole not materially misleading;

(b) contains any testimonial about, or endorsement of, the lawyer without identifying the fact that it is a testimonial or endorsement, and if payment for the testimonial or endorsement has been made, that fact must also be disclosed. If the testimonial or endorsement is not made by an actual client that fact must also be identified. If the testimonial or endorsement appears in a televised advertisement, the foregoing disclosures and identifications must appear continuously throughout the advertisement; [or]

(c) contains a dramatization or simulated description of the lawyer, partners or associates, offices or facilities, or services without identifying the fact that the description is a simulation or dramatization. If the dramatization or simulated description appears in a televised advertisement, the fact that it is a dramatization or simulated description must appear continuously throughout the advertisement.

Rule 7.1. “Truthful statements that are misleading are also prohibited” Rule 7.1, Comment [2]. “A truthful statement is misleading if it omits a fact necessary to make the lawyer’s communication considered as a whole not materially misleading,” or “if there is a substantial likelihood that it will lead a reasonable person to formulate a specific conclusion about the lawyer or the lawyer’s services for which there is no reasonable factual foundation.” Id.

In the firm name context, a designation may be misleading in several ways. First, while it may contain “the names of all or some of its members . . . the names of deceased or retired attorneys, or . . . the names of deceased or retired members, where there has been a continuing succession in the firm’s identity,” it cannot “use the name of a lawyer not associated with the firm or a predecessor of the firm, or the name of a nonlawyer.” Rule 7.5, Comment [1]. Second, it may “utilize a trade name such as ‘ABC Legal Clinic’” or “‘Kent County Legal Clinic,’” or be “designated by a distinctive website address or comparable professional designation.” Id. However, in such cases “an express disclaimer that it is not a public legal aid agency may be required to avoid a misleading implication.” Id. Third, a firm name may “include descriptive

language about the firm’s legal practice that is not comparative, suggestive of the ability to obtain results, or otherwise misleading.” Id. Examples of permissible names include “Providence Tax Law Associates,” “Providence Personal Injury Group,” “Smith Real Estate Lawyers,” and “Smith Criminal Defense Firm.” Id. By contrast, examples of impermissible names include “Best Tax Lawyers” and “Tax Fixers” because “the former [is] comparative [while] the latter [is] suggestive of the ability to obtain results.” Id.

Here, the inquiring attorney and his or her law partner wish to name their proposed new firm “Contract House LLP.” This designation is a trade name because it does not contain the names of any partners—current, former, retired, deceased, or otherwise. It also describes the firm’s practice area—contract law—as well as its organizational structure—limited liability partnership. These characteristics are all expressly permitted under Rule 7.5. See Rule 7.5, Comment [1]. Moreover, none of this language is “comparative, suggestive of the ability to obtain results, or otherwise misleading.” Id. Accordingly, the Panel finds that the proposed name satisfies Rule 7.5 and, by extension, Rule 7.1.

In reaching this conclusion, the Panel does not address or opine on the proposed name’s propriety vis-à-vis other potentially applicable authorities such as Article II, Rule 10 of the Supreme Court Rules or Rhode Island business regulations, as its brief is confined to the realm of attorney ethics under the Rules of Professional Conduct. See Rule 2(g) of the Rules of the Rhode Island Supreme Court Ethics Advisory Panel.