

Leonard Jacoby, pioneer of legal advertising on billboards and TV, dies at 83



Leonard Jacoby, Stephen Meyers and ABC News Correspondent Steve Bell, 1975 (Everett Collection)

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Jan. 17, 2026 3 AM PT

Leonard Jacoby, half of a law firm duo that pioneered advertising for lawyers and revolutionized their industry, died at 83.

He died Monday in New York from complications of cardiac arrest, according to his wife, Nancy Jacoby.

Jacoby & Meyers, the firm he co-founded, is now a mainstay on billboards across the nation. They were among the first to offer legal services to the middle class, soliciting clients through a then-novel advertising blitz that would become the blueprint for thousands of law firms.

Today, it's hard to turn on the TV or drive a few blocks in Southern California without seeing an attorney ad. In 1972, when Jacoby and fellow UCLA law school grad Stephen Meyers kicked off their practice, such advertisements didn't exist. Lawyers couldn't even talk about their firms with the press.

Nevertheless, the duo decided to hold a news conference to herald the opening of their "legal clinic" in Van Nuys, considered to be the center of the middle class they hoped to make their target market. Rich people could afford lawyers, they figured, while poor people could get free legal aid. It was the Californians stuck in the middle who had no one.

They wanted to change the game with low-cost, high-volume legal services. They accepted credit cards, offered flat fee rates, stayed open late and put offices in department stores. Reporters at the time called it the legal equivalent of a Big Mac — "quick, simple, convenient service at low cost."

The State Bar hated the news conference, disciplining the duo for what they considered an act of unethical and distasteful advertising.

"You can't imagine it was so different," said Nancy Jacoby. "The lawyers who practice in these expensive law firms were appalled."

The discipline set off what would be a years-long feud with the State Bar over a lawyer's right to advertise. They fought the case to the state Supreme Court, which found lawyers' right to tell the media about their services was protected under the 1st Amendment. Soon after, the U.S. Supreme Court opened the floodgates for lawyers to spread their names and faces far and wide.

Within a week of the 1977 ruling, the firm ran its first ad in The Times. Their first TV commercial [aired](#) that year introducing Californians to "two guys named Jacoby and Meyers."

Those two guys became an advertising powerhouse with ads popping up on late night shows, soap operas, billboards, and radio waves. They branded [themselves](#) "America's Most Familiar Law Firm."

Jacoby had a special passion for the ads, said his daughter, Sharre Jacoby.

"It was a lot of fun for him to be on the set," said Jacoby, who remembers her father cranking out folksy ads often trying to get his own family pictures in the shot. "The whole point was, 'Come on in from all walks of life.'... It was a big thing to not have them sitting behind a conference table."

It took a while for others to catch on. According to a survey from the American Bar Assn. taken five years after the Supreme Court decision, only 9% of attorneys advertised. Most still found it unseemly.

Jacoby and Meyers saw it differently. Their business exploded, first locally and soon across the nation. In January 1979, they opened 11 offices in New York in one week, according to a New

Yorker [profile](#) of their unusual business model. A decade later they'd get a name check in a [Beastie Boys](#) song. "Got more suits than Jacoby & Meyers."

Eventually, others caught up.

"What was revolutionary is now the establishment," Jacoby told a Times reporter in 1996. "We started out as revolutionaries and became the establishment."

Sure, some attorneys may have gone overboard on advertising in the decades since. But the harm caused by those excesses, Jacoby said, paled in comparison to the good that had been done by opening up the legal system to everyday people.

"I think what some of the advertising lawyers have done has hurt a little, but I don't think that detracts from all the good that's been done," Jacoby told The Times. "In general, I think people have the right to be obnoxious."

The duo's friendship deteriorated in the later part of their career, with Jacoby suing [Meyers](#) in 1995 in an attempt to dissolve the partnership after the two split to different sides of the country, Jacoby in California and Meyers in New York. Meyers [died](#) the next year at the age of 53 in a car accident in Connecticut.

Jacoby is survived by his wife Nancy, his daughter Sharre, his son, Tom Nelson, his stepdaughters Laurie Arent and Lindsey Schank, and his five grandchildren.

View article on the Los Angeles Times Website here:

<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2026-01-17/leonard-jacoby-legal-advertising-pioneer-dead-at-83>