



PR MADE EASY

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Before you spend money, expend effort and waste valuable time to promote news that could wind up receiving little attention, remember this: it is critical to separate knee-jerk, ego-based decisions from business-based ones. Deciding how and what you promote should fit into an overall strategic marketing plan that is geared towards meeting your firm's bottom line business objectives.

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In an article written for the newsletter of the Independence Chapter of the Association of Legal Administrators, marketing firm president Ellen Toplin summed up succinctly the problem with most firms' PR strategies. While seeing ones name in print is gratifying to the ego, and what most lawyers seek when they think of PR, it is not what improves the bottom line of the firm. To be successful in marketing endeavors, a firm must have a plan which incorporates all of the lawyers in the firm, and concentrates their efforts in an organized fashion.

At many of the firms I have managed, and a large percentage of those I have worked with privately, marketing has been considered mostly about creating a firm brochure, perhaps a web site, and getting lawyers' names in the paper. Any paper would do, although the local legal publication was preferred. Of course, no one bothered to think about whether the blurb in the local legal publication would actually result in new business, or even the elevation of their reputation in the community. And lawyers never hesitated to come to me months after a sparsely-attended speaking engagement with the mission of getting "news" about their seminar published as widely as possible. Yawn. The only thing worse than boring news is stale boring news.

Typically, these firms have their attorneys all doing their own thing, with no regard for what efforts each attorney is making, or toward whom their endeavors are aimed. Often this results in too much effort in some places, and not enough in

others. If you want your firm to maximize the return on your time investment in PR, you must work as a team with a plan. Imagine your firm is in a rowing competition. All of the firm's lawyers are in the longboat. But each one is rowing in their own direction and at their own pace. How competitive will your firm be against the next firm, if everyone in their boat listens to the coxswain and rows in perfect synchronized rhythm? And rest assured, there are plenty of firms out there, large and small, who have their plans developed and in well-synchronized motion already.

So your starting point before embarking on a PR program is to have a marketing plan. That's the tough part, because it means developing a vision of the firm in the future, and then mapping out a plan for how to get there. These plans should work to identify the specific industries and types of clientele which the firm aspires to represent. And then coordinate a plan which transcends practice areas, if your firm has multiple areas, to put together a total solution to the problems and needs of that industry.

Do your homework. You need to know about your potential clients. What are the challenges they face today? What challenges might they face tomorrow? Where do they go for education, networking, advice and support? You want to position your activities to ensure you are where the potential clients are. And you want to align yourself with the other professionals who service them. You want to write articles for the publications they read. You want to provide seminars that provide information of value, particularly at any formal educational venues, like conferences, they may regularly attend. You want to create a well-targeted mailing list for client bulletins, newsletters, and so forth, preferably by email to keep your costs low. And yes, you want to get the names of your attorneys in front of their faces as often as possible.

The strategic information gathering and development of your marketing plan are the hard parts. This is an area where the firm must put in a strong effort. An outside consultant can facilitate this process, and even help the firm develop its vision. And in this area there is good "bang for the buck" as I like to say, for use of an outside consultant. This is also an issue which generates lots of hot line calls. Attorneys and legal administrators call me for referrals on a regular basis. It's when they insist on a "local" and "relatively inexpensive" person that I am stumped. This is the most important part of your marketing process. It is the foundation upon which your firm will build. That's not to say that local talent doesn't exist, although I may not be aware they're out there. But this is *not* the place to penny pinch.



The actual PR, on the other hand, is not nearly as difficult. This is an area where a firm can do the work easily, and by doing so save dollars in the marketing budget which can be redirected elsewhere for more impact. Yet, I am often surprised that this is the very area where attorneys are happy to spend their budget dollars with little thought. Having trained staff at firms to handle this aspect of the marketing program, I can tell you it isn't rocket science. And therefore, the firm does not get the same "bang for the buck" when hiring an outside consultant to do this work. What follows are some basic concepts to keep in mind concerning your PR program, which will hopefully help you direct your energies and dollars wisely.

The first Rule to keep in mind is *Create Once, Use Many Times*. If you create a seminar, for example, it can be easily turned into an article, client alert, pamphlet, and newsletter article. This gives the firm a collection of materials, rather than just one. No matter what you start with, reuse it in another format. Usually a seminar or article can be modified and made relevant to another industry group with minimal effort, and then easily reworked to create yet another collection.

Placement of articles is not as difficult as one might think. First, *identify the publications which serve your target clients*. You can find this information by going to the library and checking the *Gale Directory of Publications* or checking *Bacon's Directory* online. You will also find the telephone number and address for the publication, as well as the editor's name, in these sourcebooks. Then take a close look at several issues to determine the style of the publication, and determine whether any of their issues are theme-based. Once you feel somewhat knowledgeable about the publication, work up a descriptive paragraph of the article you propose to write, including the suggested title, along with a paragraph about the credentials of the author. Then contact the editors one by one. Express your interest in providing an article. Let them know you have one in mind, but are open to writing about some other topic they may want. Keep in mind that most editors are more than happy to hear from potential high-quality authors, but their issues are planned out far in advance. So don't expect to get an immediate placement. If you can get an editorial deadline for anywhere from six months to a year of your contact with the editor you will have done well. Once in a while you're in the right place at the right time, and you can fill an immediate gap left by another author who doesn't deliver.

Sometimes you need to be persistent in order to place an article. You may have to approach the editor with a different idea every few months until he or she decides to give you an opportunity. Now the important part, which is Rule Two: never ever under any circumstances should you submit a shoddy article, submit your article late, or fail to submit it. This may seem obvious, but I



have many times worked diligently to get attorneys opportunities to publish in their target publication, only to have them totally blow it and not produce. Either they forget, or blow the deadline and figure “what’s the use?” Just like the legal community is small, so is the publishing community. I can assure you that leaving an editor in the lurch will close the door to additional opportunities at many other publications, not just the one you harmed.

The definition of a shoddy article is more difficult to communicate. First, it must be written in easily understandable language, not “legalese.” That means, for one thing, that sentences should not run on too long. And the language used should be straight-forward. Terms which seem common for attorneys must be explained. This is hard for many attorneys. Second, you should work hard to match the style of your writing to that of the publication. If the editor has to spend tons of time reworking it, you will either not get published, or will never get another chance. Third, be sure your article is not too long. Typically about 1500 - 2500 words is more than enough. Editors hate articles which run too long. Most attorneys overwork their articles, make them much too long, and too “legal” for most readers. It *is* possible to convey complex ideas in simple to understand language, and that should be your goal. Oh, and don’t forget to include some “teaser” in your article, which will lead a potential client to contact you for some additional free information.

Once you’ve published, remember Rule #1. Get reprint permission. Obtain glossy reprints of high quality for putting in your reception area and including in an envelope with firm brochures. Get permission and put the article on your web site. Send out a mailing of it to clients and potential clients (you can do this via email as well to save postage), and determine if it can be converted to a seminar or other collection piece. Keep in mind that a reprint, even if from the “*Podunk News*”, can have a great impact on clients. And don’t forget to contact the editor again with another article suggestion in another few months of your article’s publication. If you produce quality articles, it will only take one or two before the editor approaches you with ideas and requests for future articles.

Now as to getting your name published, think about where it should really appear. Where will it provide benefit for your firm in terms of letting your sources of business know you’re there, and on “top of your game” as it were. Make an appropriate list for each attorney at the firm. Don’t forget to include alumni newsletters.

Use a digital camera to take decent head shots of each attorney if you can’t afford professional photography. Black and white is preferred by most editors. Have someone else give you an honest opinion about the photo, and retake it as



many times as necessary to come up with one which is usable, or just don't use a photo. Sound obvious? Apparently not. When I amassed a law firm brochure collection from over 100 firms across the country, I was astounded at how many brochures included head shots that looked like Mr. Spock from Star Trek or Mr. Magoo from the cartoon. And way too many of the attorneys, both men and women, had hair that looked like Phyllis Diller on a bad hair day. The object of using a photo is to remind people who remember faces but not necessarily names of who you are — not to send them into an hysterical fit of laughter. Do make sure there is a label on the back of the photo with your name and firm name.

When creating your news releases keep in mind Rule Three: **don't overdo your news releases by sending them too frequently, or sending any which are stale or of little importance to the average reader.** If you overplay your PR hand, editors will start to ignore your releases. It's similar to the "boy who cried wolf" story of your youth. Even alumni newsletter editors, who are hungry for news, will ignore those who are overly "greedy" for free print space. So pick your news stories carefully, and get them out timely. Be sure that each release includes the who, what, where, when, and why (as in why they care) and/or how (as in how do they get included). Not all news stories should be after the fact — if you have sufficient advance time to get out a release ahead of time, do so.

Space constraints preclude me from providing further ideas in the space of one article. Hopefully, though, you realize that generating your own PR is not that difficult, and is something which the firm can capably do on its own. Creating a good strategic marketing plan, on the other hand, may require professional assistance. Remember that the Pennsylvania Bar Association offers a number of relatively short and good books on marketing. *The Complete Guide to Marketing Your Law Practice* by Hollis Hatfield Weishar and James A. Durham would be my first recommendation.

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