



For the Sake of Your Firm, Speak Up

By Paramjit Mahli, SCG Legal PR Network

Whatever a lawyer's comfort level is in front of an audience, public speaking should be part of his or her marketing plan. Many lawyers are quite comfortable with the written word and communicating their expertise that way, but it's important to be heard as well as read, so figure out how to get in front of the right people.

I contacted several law firm marketing consultants who all agreed that attorneys don't take enough advantage of speaking engagements at trade association conferences. Instead, they become mere professional bystanders.

Targeting opportunities that relate to your practice can bring you three advantages. You can address a captive audience that has made a specific effort to gain some insight into a topic that's important to them. You can share information about your law firm's expertise. You also have the opportunity to personally interact with the audience, which can help build further networking opportunities.

The increased visibility of a firm's lawyers can help it build its existing strengths by further enhancing its perceived expertise and by building connections to potential clients or referral sources. But a speaker can potentially reach an audience even beyond just those who are physically present. A firm will make gains by having its name and its speaker's name published in the agenda, brochures and promotions distributed to the media. The speech might also be recorded or excerpted for newsletters or other communications.

WHERE TO START?

With hundreds of speaking venues available, where do you start and what should a law firm do to get its lawyers on the circuit? How many people should be out speaking? To begin, there are several key steps to take:

1. Determine which practice area your firm should highlight in order to increase visibility. For example, if you have an expertise related to Sarbanes-Oxley compliance, you should take advantage of the current interest in the marketplace. If targeting a new area, a good idea may be to join a trade association for that constituency locally and nationally and to start attending some of these events.
2. Develop a speaker placement program. Many small firms are resistant to having an internal or external organization dedicated to aggressively identifying opportunities with conference

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organizers, but such a tactic can be very effective. For instance, South Carolina circuit court judge William Howard, known for keeping cameras out of the Susan Smith murder trial, joined Charleston-based Young Clement Rivers in the summer of 2004.

The law firm works with a local communications firm, Rawle Murdy, which set up speaking engagements for Howard, positioning him as a well-respected, no-nonsense judge offering behind-the-bench insights to counsel. This speaking program is accomplishing several objectives: producing media coverage of the firm's new special counsel, building visibility for the firm, strengthening its reputation, and generating new prospects and leads for business.

3. Do your homework. Research the major conferences of bar associations and trade groups and identify appropriate speaking engagements where the audience is made up of your firm's target client base. Make sure you give conference planners the option to have your speaker as a back-up speaker, should unforeseen circumstances arise.

4. Create high-impact presentations. Audiences want information that they can take back to their businesses. When creating these presentations, remember to avoid making it a sales pitch for your firm. Tie the presentation to the overall growth goals and business goals of the firm, and know the format that the conference organizers expect.

Marketing consultant Nader Anise, who's based in Boca Raton, Fla., frequently gives marketing presentations to large groups. He reminds attorneys that visual aids, such as PowerPoint slides, should only be used to supplement the talk, not as a crutch. Another tip: Always remember that technology can fail, so be prepared with a hardcopy backup.

5. Decide on the geographic area to target for speaking engagements -- local, regional, national, or international. If you are just starting a speaking program, approach local chambers of commerce, rotary clubs, press clubs and other community-based organizations. Be mindful of knowing what audience attends these events so that the presentation will be appropriate for the listeners.

AFTER THE EVENT

Follow up. Obtaining speaking engagements can be very competitive, and law firms need to rise above the noise. Anise recommends offering a "free special report" or a "free checklist" -- information of value with the attorney's contact information on it. Just offering a business card will not get most people's attention.

Mark Houck of Miami-based, Houck, Hamilton & Anderson, which specializes in maritime law, cautions that a firm should not expect clients immediately after a speaking engagement or after a client seminar. It should instead view speaking opportunities as "foundation building." But you

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don't have to be passive about building that foundation: Once the presentation is made, a firm should make the speech available on its Web site. Have a section on your site that lists all the firm's upcoming events and speaking engagements.

By developing a good speaker placement program and regular newsletters, small law firms will have taken a huge step towards meeting their public relations and business development objectives.

About the Author

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About SCG Legal PR Network

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