



Law Firm PR and Speaking Engagements: How to Get Them

By Paramjit Mahli, SCG Legal PR Network

Like it or not, speaking engagements are a very important component of a public relations plan of any law firm intent on growth. Whether you fear public speaking or your workload leaves little free time, it is important to find a way to make room for speaking.

Well-known marketers such as Dan Kennedy and countless others agree that speaking engagements are one of the fastest ways to get new clients. Firms need to expose their areas of expertise to prospective clients. By speaking at conferences and forums put together by professional and industry trade groups, attorneys can increase their firms' visibility and consequently their prospects for attracting new business. What speaking does is give the speaker special status, thus making it easier for speakers to meet prospects. Attendees expect speakers to reach out to the audience, and in turn they give speakers respect and credibility. According to the American Society of Association of Executives, the conferences and meeting industry is a \$56 billion-dollar market.

However, a word of caution. If you are expecting overnight success, think twice: public relations, like gardening, requires nurturing, pruning and weeding out. So how and where do you begin?

- In most cases, speaking can be a waste of time. Do some strategic thinking. Target the associations you would like to get in front of. Who do you want your audience to be? For example, if your firm specializes in personal injury law, you may want to speak in front of a group of human resource managers about preventing hazardous conditions in the workplace. For bankruptcies, attorneys/ financial planners/accounting associations might be a good fit. Start locally, and build up a portfolio. Bottom line: you must identify the speaking opportunities that will let you reach your intended audience. If you want to improve your skills, start with Toastmasters International, which has chapters in most cities. Members generally meet once a week, presenting impromptu and prepared speeches and receiving feedback.
- Designate a speaker for the firm. This can get a bit tricky depending on the size of the firm and which areas the firm wishes to focus upon. It is best to start small and build a strong foundation. The designated speaker should have speaking experience. For small to medium-sized firms, the best choice would be a senior or managing partner.
- From time to time, attorneys do get invited to speak in front of groups. Don't wait for this to happen. Have someone in the firm or a marketing public relations firm actively working on targeting opportunities. This person or firm is responsible for developing relationships with event and industry associations, submitting proposals and, most importantly, staying in touch with contacts. It is always a good idea to get yourself on a group's backup list of speakers. Stay on the right side of event organizers.

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- It is crucial to tailor the speaker proposals you submit to event organizers. You want to make their lives easy. Ask them whether they prefer e-mail, hard copy or fax for submissions. Make sure you meet all deadlines and that all appropriate material is sent together, such as bios, previous speaking engagements, etc. Do not send information in dribs and drabs. Chances are materials will get lost in the clutter.
- If you are targeting a particular group and it is not giving your firm the time of day, offer to write for the group's newsletter. This will go a long way toward building a relationship and demonstrating to the organization that your firm is very serious.
- Finally, follow up, follow up follow up. Being persistent in a non-obtrusive way goes a long way in helping your firm stand above the crowd.

Publicizing and marketing the event is only one component of ensuring a successful presentation; equally important is the talk itself. Aside from generating new business, an effective speech can result in the organization inviting the speaker back or the attendees recommending the speaker to other groups.

A couple of things to bear in mind are to know why you are giving the presentation, to whom are you making it, where you are speaking, what you are going to say and how you will say it. Once you are clear on this, put all the themes in a logical order, jot down notes, prepare visuals and memorize the introduction.

Keep your structure simple: thank the attendees and give an itinerary for your presentation: indicate what topics will be discussed and when questions can be asked. Bottom line is set the agenda up front.

The middle part of the presentation is basically keeping true to the agenda. Ensure that the order is logical and inform the audience when you are moving on to the next theme.

The conclusion should summarize your presentation and open the floor to questions.

Although most of the preparations will have been completed beforehand, there are more logistics to take care of on the day of the presentation. Take caring of these logistics will ensure the smooth flow of the presentation. They include:

- Familiarizing yourself with the room and having all the audiovisuals working properly. Technical hiccups can make the difference between a mediocre and superior presentation.
- Speaking slowly, clearly and confidently, and adding color to the presentation by relating personal experiences and giving case histories and examples.
- Realizing that if you stumble, miss a word or have a long pregnant pause, you shouldn't apologize. Long pauses are good for building up drama and they provide the listener with variety.

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As long as you have done all the preparatory work and are confident that you are giving the audience useful information, your presentation will be successful. The more speaking engagements you have, the more comfortable you will become. In the meantime, joining an organization such as Toastmasters International will provide the opportunity to give presentations regularly and build up your speaking skills.

About the Author

Paramjit L. Mahli is with award-winning SCG Legal PR Network. She is a former journalist who has worked with CNN Business News, Canadian Broadcast Corporation and Journal of Commerce. Comprised of small and Am Law 100 firms, SCG Legal PR Network connects legal experts with reporters nationally and internationally. Ms. Mahli is a contributor to Legal Broadcast Network and writes frequently for Technolawyer. She also trains and gives CLEs regularly on media relations. Ms. Mahli can be reached at pmahli@scglegalprnetwork.com.

About SCG Legal PR Network

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