

Holding a Press Conference

By Sharon Berman

We live in a digital age that allows us to work with individuals from around the world. Yet, despite technological advances that enable us to share information virtually, there is still a need for law firms to hold live press conferences. Such events are important because they allow you and your firm to gather journalists from an array of media outlets, who can then disseminate your message immediately to a broad audience.

Holding a press conference signals that something is significant, timely and worth listening to right away. It's also a way to attract additional plaintiffs to strengthen your hand. From the defense point of view, a press conference after a victory signals your success and your client's vindication.

As media budgets diminish, it is more difficult than ever to attract a journalist's attention, and there are fewer professionals available to cover an ever-expanding territory. Therefore, it's critical to be judicious in deciding to hold a press conference and to do so only when you have fresh, interesting and important news. Not only will this help you garner media coverage, but it will also underscore your credibility among journalists, who are often pulled in competing directions at once.

Here's how you can maximize the value for all involved in your press conference and avoid the pitfalls.

Hold your press conference promptly. An event, like a court decision, may drive the conference's timing, but sometimes you have more of a choice as to when to hold it, such as a lawsuit's filing. Aim to hold the news conference within 24 hours of giving



notice, and despite our society's endless news cycle, try not to hold the conference on Friday afternoon.

Choose an effective spokesperson. The person who will make the most impact is the plaintiff or defendant. Often, though, that person may be uncomfortable in front of a camera, hard to understand, or have other challenges. The attorney may make the best spokesperson with her client by her side. Whomever you choose, plan to have no more than two spokespersons.

If your spokesperson lacks experience in this high-pressure venue, definitely consider media training. Media training can help that individual come across well in front of the camera and ameliorate bad on-camera habits. Still, it can't transform someone in a short span of time. Additionally, there are many individuals who will never be able to serve as spokespersons, no matter how much training they receive. Whether the spokesperson is you, your client or both, the person who delivers your message should be poised, able to think on her feet, and able to handle the pressure of multiple questions coming at once.

A thumbnail version of media training includes watching your posture — sitting

erect or standing straight with your feet planted about shoulder-width apart. Also, you should wear conservative clothing and jewelry to avoid distracting the audience. If you believe that press conferences are in your future, you may want to enroll in media training now.

Issue a media alert to publicize your press conference. A media alert differs from a press release in it is just that — an alert that something warrants attention and is going to happen now. Include the conference's time, date and place in the alert; clearly state the reason it's taking place and what journalists can expect to learn. In short, tell reporters why they should attend.

Select a press conference location that is convenient for journalists. While it's easier to control environments such as your law firm's office, there are times when you want to send a message via the chosen location — on the courthouse steps, for example.

Have the proper equipment available and be certain it is in working order. At the news conference, make sure to have a lectern and/or table, electrical outlets and a microphone that you've tested before the conference begins. Also consider having a high-quality sound system. Have a place for journalists to set up their mics. If you or your presenters are seated at a table, raise your chairs a few inches so that you can be seen.

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Before you begin, make sure water and glasses are on the table for the spokesperson. Have someone tape record or videotape the conference so that you can critique yourself for future press conferences. This type of record is also important to cover yourself in case there are any questions about what was discussed.

Make it clear from the time the journalists arrive that you or your marketing/public relations representative is in control of the conference and message. Someone from the firm, or your representative, should introduce herself and give a press packet to every reporter who attends. It's also important to get journalists' names and those of the news organizations they represent. Give them your business card and explain how the news conference will run — when it will start, who will speak, how long they will talk, and that you will take questions at the end. The press packet should contain a one-sheet about the firm and a brief biography about you. If you have already distributed press releases earlier in the story's history, include the most recent one.

As the presenter, begin by introducing yourself and briefly explaining what your firm does. Make a statement about the press conference's subject and why the conference is being held. Reiterate how the conference will run, and give three succinct bullet points with the messages you want to convey.

When the conference opens to questions, point to the questioning reporter and ask him to say his name and which organization he represents, or use that person's name if you already know him. If there is as large group of reporters, limit the number of questions to one per person with one follow-up question. If you don't know the answer to a question, state that you don't know and that you will provide an answer in the future if, indeed, that is the case.

When the questions are nearly over or you want to conclude the conference, say, "I'll take one last question." As you close, let the reporters know whom they should contact if they need to follow up. Keep the entire conference to 30 to 45 minutes.

Remember that the walls have ears. During the conference, do not say anything that you don't want anyone else to hear or report. Follow this rule not just while you are near the microphone, but also anywhere in the room.

After the press conference, if you promised anyone you'd provide additional information, do so right away. Additionally, for those journalists who indicated an interest in the conference but couldn't attend, immediately send them a summary or press release.

Although our world so often invites us to interact with fellow professionals whom we seldom meet in person, live press conferences can still be an effective means to broadcast your newsworthy information. Calling such media events only when necessary and executing them correctly will help you maximize your efforts and receive the widespread media attention your messages deserve. ■

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