

Good news, bad news: How lawyers and law firms can maximize media relations

Janet Ellen Raasch

Janet Ellen Raasch is a writer and ghostwriter who works closely with lawyers, law firms and other professional services providers – to help them achieve name recognition and new business through publication of articles and books for print and keyword-rich content for the Internet. She can be reached at (303) 399-5041 or jeraasch@msn.com.

Any time the name of a lawyer or a law firm shows up in the media, it is usually the consequence of either advertising or public relations. The two are very different.

Advertising is publicity that is paid for. As a result, the lawyer or law firm controls the final product – the exact words or graphics that appear in the ad or the “advertorial.”

Media relations is publicity that is “free” (although the firm might be paying an employee or agency to generate it). As a result, the lawyer or law firm cannot control the final product – the exact words or graphics that appear in the resulting editorial content.

Because it has gone through the filter of an expert outside reporter and editor, editorial content has more credibility with the public than advertising. A good media relations program helps a law firm balance the considerable benefits of lower cost and greater credibility against the calculated risks that come with loss of control.

“If handled well and according to a strategic plan, media relations can achieve positive publicity for a lawyer or law firm among members of its target market,” said Cheryl Bame. “If handled poorly and without a plan, public relations can be ineffective or – even worse – result in negative publicity.”

Bame is principal at Los Angeles-based Bame Public Relations (www.bamepr.com). She discussed media relations opportunities for lawyers and law firms at the monthly educational program of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association (www.rockymountainlma.com), held in Denver April 8 at Maggiano’s Little Italy.

Media relations campaigns can be handled in-house by an individual lawyer or law firm, externally by a consultant or agency, or by the two working in tandem. Responsibility for media relations often falls to a marketing department or administrator. Some large firms with very public profiles have staff devoted exclusively to media relations.

“Before undertaking any media relations effort, a lawyer or law firm should focus – carefully defining the target market for the particular media campaign,” said Bame.

“No lawyer has the time to be all things to all people,” said Bame. “What is your target market? Who belongs to this target market? Which media – print and electronic – do they turn to for their information? Which organizations do they belong to? Armed with this information, you can efficiently and effectively direct your PR efforts.”

A lawyer or law firm must have client permission before revealing any client relationship.

Reports in the media

One way to get media coverage is to proactively contact a reporter with a good story idea.

“Once you have defined your target market, find out which issues its members are interested in,” said Bame. “If you do not know – just ask! Ask your lawyers what kinds of cases and matters are coming in the door. Ask your clients and potential clients what issues are keeping them awake at night. Monitor the media to uncover local, regional, national and international legal and business trends that you can tap into.”

Lawyers and law firms should understand that reporters and editors are in the news business – not the business of providing free publicity to law firms. “The best way to develop a good relationship with a reporter is to be a consistent source of good story ideas that will help the reporter succeed at his or her job,” said Bame.

For lawyers serving businesses, news is defined as the information people in a particular industry need to know in order to make good business decisions. For lawyers serving individuals, news is defined as the information individuals need to know in order to make good decisions about their personal lives. These are the criteria reporters and editors will use to decide whether your story idea is “newsworthy.”

“A classic press release with broad distribution can work when you want to notify the media of ‘commodity’ news like a new partner, a new office or an award,” said Bame. “Today, press releases are almost always distributed electronically.”

Unless there is something unique about commodity news (an extremely well-known new partner, a “green” office, or a very exclusive award), it will most likely end up in a list of similar generic announcements. Even though an event may be big news to a law firm, it might not be big news to the business or consumer communities.

“Real news involves an event or trend likely to have an impact on the actual decisions of a business or consumer class,” said Bame. “When this is the case, you will want to target the best media outlets for your news and contact the reporters directly – by email or phone – to gauge their interest in the story. For a really, really big story where you want the best coverage, you can offer the reporter an exclusive.

“Just be sure that, once you have the reporter’s attention, the people involved with the story are ready, willing and able to respond in a timely fashion,” said Bame. “Don’t let them go on vacation! Reporters work on tight deadlines. Failure to respect this fact of a reporter’s life can get a lawyer or law firm blacklisted from future stories.

“Sources should not only be available, they should be prepared and rehearsed on the most important ‘talking points’ and, in the case of television or radio, the best way to present themselves for that medium,” said Bame. “Obviously, they should be articulate.”

Sometimes, the media take the initiative and contact a lawyer or law firm for background information or for a statement about a newsworthy case or matter. In this case, your response is reactive rather than proactive.

“No matter how you feel about the issue or case, avoid the classic ‘no comment,’” said Bame. “A refusal to comment will not prevent a reporter from running the story. It will only sound bad and guarantee that the story will run without your point of view.

“If you are not ready to talk,” said Bame, “promise to call the reporter back shortly, consult with the client (and your PR consultant!) and come up with a statement. The information you provide might be enough to quash a negative story.”

Articles written by lawyers

Lawyers and law firms can get positive media coverage by writing and distributing by-lined articles for the business, trade, legal or consumer press.

“Before you start to write, have a specific publication or other news outlet in mind,” said Bame. “Be familiar with readership and editorial guidelines – like article length.” Most publications require that articles be written in *Associated Press* style – not the *Blue Book* style with which lawyers are most familiar.

Most publications follow an editorial calendar – with different issues devoted to different (often rotating) themes,” said Bame. “If you propose a topic that fits within a theme, you have a better chance of success. Contact the editor and get approval of your topic before you even begin to write. Then, make sure you meet all deadlines. The section editor will be counting on you. A content ‘hole’ at the last minute will damage your relationship.”

It takes a lot of time and thought to come up with a newsworthy, informative and consumer-friendly article. “Once written and published, article reprints can be sent to clients, handed out at events, and included with RFP materials,” said Bame.

“Reprints can be sent as ‘background’ to reporters covering that issue,” said Bame. “They can be sent to event planners to get you on their radar as a speaker. Electronic versions can be posted to Web sites, in newsletters and client alerts, and in blogs. They can be used as the basis for creating a speech or PowerPoint presentation.”

Today, articles can be distributed to a wide range of electronic publishers, who are often eager to publish good free content along with the lawyer's name, contact information and a link to the firm's Web site. Lawyers and law firms are also creating and posting to the Internet their own audio and video coverage – including videos on YouTube.

“If handled well and according to a strategic plan,” said Bame, “media relations can achieve positive targeted publicity for a lawyer or law firm – for less cost and with greater credibility than advertising.”