

Public Relations 101: How to Transform Yourself or Your Law Firm Into a Thought Leader and Media Darling

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Have you ever wondered how some lawyers go from simply practicing law to appearing in countless articles and even television shows as a noted expert? Public relations makes this transformation possible — but only if properly implemented. In this TechnoFeature article, legal public relations expert Paramjit Mahli explains how to put together an efficient and successful public relations campaign that can establish you as a leading expert in your field.

INTRODUCTION

When professionally implemented, law firm public relations achieves several objectives, including being an effective tool to support sales and marketing goals as well as positioning your practice groups as thought leaders and experts. However, for law firms going through the motions it isn't enough; it is like having a PR hologram — the firm is not really committed in thoughts and deeds.

To avoid disappointment and failure, all the decision makers of the firm must be clear on the answers to the following questions:

- Why does the firm want public relations at this particular time?
- Who is the target audience?
- Is the public relations strategy realistic?

- What are the specific public relations tactics? For example providing CLE (both online and in person), getting published, becoming a source for the press, conducting seminars, etc.?
- Can public relations goals be met within the allocated time frame?
- Do you want public relations for practice groups or do you want public relations help when working on a specific case?
- How long will the firm commit to the public relations initiatives?
- How will the success of the program be measured?
- Which attorneys will regularly talk to the public relations professionals to brainstorm ideas, etc.?
- How comfortable are the attorneys talking with the press?
- Do the attorneys have a basic 101 understanding of how the press works?

Once these questions have been answered it's simply a case of which public relations tactics the firm should pursue. The most common that build visibility are publishing articles, speaking, and media relations.

GETTING PUBLISHED

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For many lawyers accustomed to long, hard hours buried in books, getting their name in ink is a more effective marketing strategy. Bar associations' newsletters often have volunteer editorial positions. These opportunities can lead to networking with other writers of all professional levels who work at law firms.

Lawyers can also get involved with editorial work either by writing articles or becoming an editor. These are volunteer positions, but they all lead to building relationships with other lawyers of all backgrounds who are at different stages in their careers.

Where you can publish:

- Write and publish articles (not advertorials) for trade publications, bar newsletters, trade

newsletters, local community papers, and Web sites. For email newsletters especially, you never know who the subscribers will forward the articles to, so it's an excellent source of exposure.

- Post comments on blogs or news Web sites.
- Get listed as a speaker or panelist.
- Collaborate on a project for publication. This strategy is especially valuable for those associates who want to build their rainmaking skills. Do the work and get your byline in a published article.

When approached strategically, getting published can help you:

- Increase your law firm's visibility with key constituents.
- Begin building relationships with editors of publications read by your target market.
- Enhance the law firm, attorneys, and associates' reputations.
- Expose your law firm to new audiences.
- Establish your expertise.
- Give prospective clients a way to sample your knowledge.

There is no instant gratification when becoming an expert. It takes time to acquire a collection of works in which you were quoted and to build an expert reputation.

SPEAK YOUR MIND

Another common public relations tactic is speaking. Speaking at industry conferences and forums,

attorneys can increase their firms' visibility and, consequently, opportunities for attracting new business. Speaking engagements 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.

Aside from the obvious goal of bringing in new clients, assessing other long- and short-term objectives are equally important. These objectives include:

- Building strategic alliances with trade/industry organizations.
- Increasing email newsletter subscriptions.
- Exposing your firm to new prospects.
- Networking with other panelists.
- Building the firm's profile with a group.

Speaking at industry conferences and forums, attorneys can increase their firms' visibility and, consequently, opportunities for attracting new business.

Law firms need to be aware that like any other marketing activity, speaking once at a conference or panel will not bring business. What's important is showing up and being consistent. There's an old adage that people do business with whom they like, know, and

trust. Speaking is not only a way to establish trust, but enables you to break bread with potential clients.

One of the biggest mistakes lawyers make after giving a successful presentation, whether it be moderating a panel, speaking a panel, or giving a CLE course, is riding off into the sunset and expecting new clients to flock immediately. This non-strategy often results in missed opportunities for networking with a captive audience and other panelists.

MEDIA RELATIONS

Becoming a source for the press is a position that is coveted by many attorneys, especially those who understand the role of being an expert in building their law practice.

Simply put, a source gives short, concise quotes, responds quickly to all media requests, and does not wait until one "suits" them. Although they may not have all the answers, a source will take the initiative and time and look into their network to help the reporter. Sources are experts very familiar with the reporter's beat and regularly send story ideas and developments in that area.

Whether you are just starting to build your practice or are a seasoned attorney, how do you become a valuable source for the press?

Start with the following:

1. By taking an active role in one of the committees at your bar, you will be listed in directories. Reporters use directories as important tools to reach out to potential sources. You can list yourself as an expert in various

directories used by the press (disclosure — our company manages the SCG Legal PR Network).

2. When you give seminars or educational speeches, invite a reporter who covers that area. Follow up by sending him or her a copy of your speech with a note inviting them to call you with additional questions.
3. Make sure your firm has an online press room. Having a press room will increase your chances of becoming a resource because reporters will have constant access to all of your firm's news releases, reports, photos, videos, and/or other resources. These resources will help reporters flesh out information you give them in interviews.
4. You can start becoming a resource by writing letters di-

rectly to editors. Just make sure that you have followed reporters' bylines and know their areas of interest well. You want to demonstrate that you have done your homework, so you don't waste their time. Don't forget the old axiom: first impressions count.

5. Scan editorial calendars often for stories relevant to your practice area expertise, and contact the writer for stories that pertain to your knowledge and experience.

Undoubtedly, you'll always have other competing interests for your time, which explains why your public relations strategy is so critical. For example, rather than a scattershot approach, a focused campaign may include articles that you can leverage into other marketing activities, such as incorporating them into blog posts and white papers, republishing

them in your firm's newsletter, and using them as the basis for presentations and speeches.

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CONCLUSION

If your law firm hires a public relations firm, you must participate wholeheartedly in the campaign to be successful. Otherwise, your firm is better off spending those dollars on other marketing tactics or focusing on billable hours. Each public relations tactic has its merits. But the right hand must know what the left hand is doing. Otherwise, you're just throwing ideas at the wall, hoping that something sticks.

Paramjit L. Mahli of the award winning [SCG Legal PR Network](#) is a former journalist based in New York. The network, comprised of small and large law firms, connects legal experts with reporters. Ms. Mahli is also a contributor to a Legal Broadcast Network.

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