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In the Know

Establishing Expertise in Your Niche

By Sharon Berman

I recently had a conversation with a seasoned and accomplished attorney who had developed an idea for a unique niche. He hoped that it would help him differentiate himself from his competitors and lead to additional work. In fact, he had already gone beyond the idea stage by giving several presentations on the subject to groups of his peers. He had received positive feedback, which helped him refine his ideas of the subject matter and further develop the concept.

His goal was to become associated with this particular niche and become known as *the guy* for any legal work related to it. But when the editors of a couple of well-known legal publications had asked him to write articles on the subject, he had resisted. He said he wanted to wait until he was an expert, regarded as an authority in the field.

My conversation with him centered on expertise. I challenged him on the notion of whether he was already an expert. After all, expertise comes in many degrees. Who else had even given this area any thought, let alone developed and delivered multiple presentations? What he really needed to do was to develop the image of being an expert and an authority on the subject. This involves building a body of work and “packaging” it to showcase his knowledge. To become known as an expert, to become authoritative, to be credible, you need a body of work and materials to substantiate your claim.

Of course I’m not suggesting that professionals should hold themselves out as experts in areas about which they know nothing. Nor am I suggesting that being seen as an expert is all about the sizzle and



not about the substance. Rather, no matter what your practice area or the size of your firm, you can position yourself as knowledgeable on a certain subject by building a body of work which substantiates your claim to fame.

The keystone of any foundation in this area is publishing by-lined articles. These articles, written under your name rather than by a reporter, send a powerful message - they bestow invaluable third-party credibility. After all, if someone publishes your work, you must know what you’re talking about. And where you publish brings additional cachet. For example, an article in the Harvard Business Review may carry more weight than one published in a local business journal. But the critical thing is to start publishing.

“I don’t have anything to write about,” is a common refrain I hear from attorneys. The truth is that you have plenty of topics to write about. You are too close to your subject to realize it. Your intimate knowledge of your practice area may lead you to assume these topics are too mundane or that everyone knows about them already. But you are wrong about that.

Take a few quiet moments and think about the common questions that come up in your area:

- **What are the common stumbling blocks that trip up your clients, sending them to your office for help?**
- **Can you come up with a list of “Ten Things You Need to Know About (insert topic)”?**
- **Has a decision recently come down that has implications for work in your area?**
- **What trends are you seeing? Have several clients come to you lately with an issue that arose less frequently in the past? If so, that’s a trend and may make good material.**

If you take some time to consider these questions, you will soon develop some ideas for articles.

When it comes to writing, you have two options: write the article yourself using the publication’s editorial guidelines; or use a ghostwriter. A ghostwriter allows you to provide the information orally or in very raw written form to a professional writer, who drafts articles you edit yourself.

How can you find places to be published?

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Think about what professional publications you're reading, and more importantly, what your clients are reading. "Publications" also include websites which may or may not be associated with print outlets. Most, if not all, publications and websites are always looking for informative material. It's always a good idea to run your concept by the editor before you start writing, just to avoid duplicating something the editor is already running. Once you get the okay, hit the keyboard.

But getting an article published is just the beginning. If you stop there, you've let the air out of the balloon. The real impact comes from how you leverage the article, specifically how you use it for marketing purposes. One way to leverage your article is by making hard copy paper reprints to

include in your presentation materials or marketing folder, place in your law firm's reception area, and hand out at speaking engagements. You can also post an e-print on your law firm or personal website. Another powerful action is to distribute your article to your established mailing list, whether by hard copy or via e-mail. (These steps all assume that you have obtained reprint or e-print rights.)

One article by itself may not an authority make, but once you get the momentum of writing, publishing and distribution going, your body of work can start growing quickly. And you can use the same subject matter for two different articles in different outlets. For example, one publication may want a longer, more in-depth version, while another is interested in the quick

read. With some rewriting and a totally different word count (e.g., 1,000 words versus 2,500 words) you can make sure the articles don't sound the same. You don't need to develop new subject matter - just a different way of presenting it.

Additional pathways to establishing yourself as an expert, and they have their place, include speaking to organizations and being quoted in the media. But if you want to build a body of work that lends credibility to your expertise, there's no better foundation than demonstrating it in print.

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