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The Power of Public Relations

By Sharon Berman

Public relations can be a powerful tool to move your marketing agenda forward. As it says, public relations is about creating relationships with your “publics,” i.e., clients, referral sources, influencers, and the media. The latter is often referred to as “media relations.”

Overall, PR contributes to creating “top-of-mind” awareness of you and your firm as the experts, so that when there is a need, prospective clients think of you first. Media relations imparts the power of third-party validation. In other words, if your name appears in print—hardcopy or online—you must be an expert.

Many firms believe in the importance of public relations, but they are not certain what their tactical options are other than to “get our name out there.” Whether you already have PR counsel, are considering hiring a PR firm, or plan to play the role yourself, it’s important to know the pros and cons of the various tactics and how each supports your marketing strategy. For the purposes of this article, let’s limit the discussion to media relations and narrow it down further to print and online media outlets, e.g., publications, web sites, etc.

Expert Spokesperson/ Being Quoted

This public relations tactic positions you as a resource for the media, so they will call you when they need background information for a story or commentary on a case or trend. Having your name appear in print again and again contributes to placing you at the top of the list when prospective clients think of experts in your subject area.



One of the “pros” of being quoted is that it’s usually easier and much less time-consuming to talk with a journalist than it is to sit down and write an article, prepare a talk, etc. You must be willing, however, to make yourself available to talk with reporters on their time-table, provide them with background information and explain the playing field. Once you have proven yourself as a responsive resource, you are apt to become their “go-to” attorney.

A significant disadvantage of the “expert spokesperson” tactic is that you do not control the communication. Once you have honed your message and talked with the journalist, it is out of your control. You do not have control over whether you are actually quoted, whether your name is spelled correctly, if your practice area or firm name is included, or the context of the quote. You and your PR counsel can subtly encourage the reporter to use the correct and complete information, but ultimately, it is up to the media outlet and its editor.

You have to keep in mind that journalists are moving quickly, often jumping from subject to subject, and are under pressure to meet tight deadlines. They may not realize that your quote in a different con-

text takes on a different flavor. Attorneys also have the disadvantage of not being able or willing to talk in-depth, if at all, about many of the subjects that interest journalists, e.g., a client’s lawsuit, trial, transaction, celebrity clients, etc. That’s where positioning yourself as a practice expert, e.g., intellectual property, gives you more flexibility.

Another disadvantage is that being quoted may not provide a great deal of marketing leverage. Much of the power of being in print comes from the distribution of reprints to clients, prospective clients and referral sources. Thus, if you only have a one-sentence quote in a three-page article, or are one of five experts quote, reprinting and distributing it may not be worthwhile. You can still reference it on your Web site (e.g., “John Smith was quoted in Fortune discussing espionage in the workplace”) to highlight your expertise in a certain subject area.

However, don’t let these disadvantages discourage you from establishing yourself as an expert with the media. As long as you are aware of the pros, cons and caveats, you or your PR counsel can work to ensure that being quoted in a prestigious publication is as thrilling as it is rewarding.

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Pitching Stories

Print and online publications always appreciate getting the jump on an interesting story—a trend, new legislation or a recent court decision. The idea behind pitching stories to the media is that you will be quoted in the story.

Since you are the one who is pitching the story, the advantage is that you have greater influence over how the material will be used. At the very least, you increase your chances of being quoted, and what's more, you may become the focal point of the story. Bringing a reporter a good idea also gets you "brownie points" and helps build a relationship. And if your story is published, you benefit from that coveted third-party validation.

The disadvantage of pitching stories is the lack of control, similar to that of being an expert spokesperson. It's not unheard of for a journalist to pick up on your idea and publish an extensive article without mentioning you at all.

Bylined Articles

An effective way to showcase your expertise is with bylined articles in professional and trade publications. A bylined article is an article written under your byline, i.e., listing your name rather than a reporter's name as the author. A bylined article positions you as an expert because you are writing the entire article.

One of the advantages of bylined articles is that you control the communication. Although your article may be edited, you often have the opportunity to review and approve the final product.

Bylined articles give you marketing leverage because they make the distribution of reprints and e-prints worthwhile. These reprints add to the body of work that

makes you an expert in your field. You can display them (e.g., in your office, at conferences, trade shows and speaking engagements) or mail or e-mail them to clients, prospects and referral sources.

Most articles inform and educate your target markets, the idea being to give away some of your knowledge in order to attract work. It is this kind of information that interests prospective clients and referral sources. In other words, if you distribute an article in which you are quoted, it is about you. On the other hand, if you send out an article that you have written (or had ghost-written for you) for the purposes of educating the reader, it is about the prospective client.

Unfortunately, some of the most prestigious and coveted publications do not accept bylined articles. They have regular columnists or they limit bylined articles to opinion pieces that may not lend themselves to showcasing your expertise.

There is a misconception that professional and trade journals are so hungry for material that they will accept anything, and that therefore, writing for one of these publications does not confer expert cachet. The truth is that the editor's job is to provide interesting and worthwhile material to the readers because without readers, its advertisers won't support the publication. So, while trade publications may be hungry for articles, they also must be discriminating and weed out articles that are not the right fit or lack the necessary sophistication for the readership.

Of course, creating an entire article is more time-consuming than providing a reporter with comments, and some attorneys do not want to do any more writing than they have to in their practice. That's why many professionals have ghostwriters write the article for them. However, since

the writer still depends on the professional's brainpower, expect to spend some time being interviewed for the article and editing the final product.

Press Releases

Press releases are an excellent tactic to get the word out about news concerning your activities and your firm, such as a success story, a deal closing, a new partner or a new practice area. Whether they are picked up by a publication or just posted on your Web site, news releases tell the story of your active firm and position you as a leader in your field.

The advantage of press releases is that they pique the media's interest, which may result in a larger story. A disadvantage is that news does not happen all the time. It's important that you issue press releases to the media only when you have a significant news item. If you send too many releases about everyday matters (e.g., switching your billing system), editors will no longer pay attention when you have big news. However, a PR professional can help you identify appropriate topics for the media and develop newsworthy angles for subjects that at first glance may seem mundane.

Which is Right for You?

Each public relations tactic has its place. Being quoted as an expert in a major publication is prestigious, but it's only one arrow in your quiver. For the greatest possible marketing punch, carefully evaluate your goals and select a tactic or combination of tactics that will provide the greatest leverage for your investment of time and money. If you know your options, you can maximize their advantages and mitigate their disadvantages.