

MARKETING SPOTLIGHT

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The Publics of Law Firms

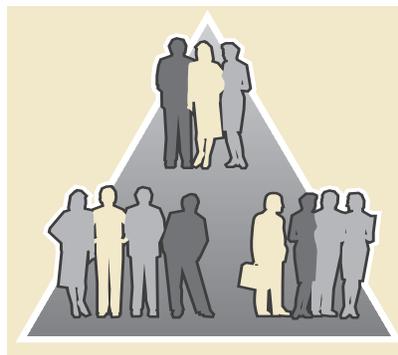
By Sharon Berman

I recently spoke with partners from two separate law firms about implementing a public relations program. Independent of each other, they expressed their skepticism about the value of such a program for a law firm saying that being in *People* magazine or on *Oprah* would not bring them many clients. What they were actually thinking of was “publicity,” which refers to getting media coverage and even gaining notoriety. But that is just one aspect of public relations.

Doing business in and around the entertainment capital of the world, it's easy to understand why someone who hears the term “public relations” immediately thinks of *Larry King Live*, *Entertainment Weekly* or other venues where celebrities can tout their latest wares or rehab stints. But what these attorneys overlook is that the “public” in public relations refers to *their* publics, not those of Britney Spears.

Who Are Your Publics?

Public relations is defined in the *American Heritage Dictionary* as “the art and science of establishing and promoting a favorable relationship with the public” through a variety of tactics. But, the “public” should not mean the general public. The publics of law firms are usually current, prospective and former clients, referral sources, influencers, and any other publics that are relevant to the firm's practice areas. It is your relationship with these publics on which your marketing and public relations campaign will focus. In fact, targeting your own publics is much simpler and more cost-efficient than trying to reach the masses.



Different firms and practice areas will have different publics with which they want to communicate. That's why your first step in a marketing and public relations program is to identify who your publics are, and where they are. The parameters can be defined geographically, demographically, by industry, and/or by company contacts.

In addition to the common law firm publics already mentioned, the practice of public relations engenders its own subset of publics. This includes journalists, editors, and TV producers who provide a conduit to your primary publics. Your relationships with these contacts come under the heading of “media relations,” another aspect of public relations.

Some practice areas might consider key bloggers as an important group with which to communicate. Another public is influencers – those who influence a prospect's decision, but may not use the firm's services themselves. These may include bankers, civic leaders, well-connected professionals and other referral sources who often give advice or otherwise guide someone's choice of a lawyer or firm. Depending on your firm's practice area,

other publics with whom you may want to communicate include community organizations, lobbying groups or governmental agencies.

What Do You Tell Them?

A second *American Heritage Dictionary* definition of public relations is “the methods and activities employed to establish and promote a favorable relationship with the public.” Your methods and activities to promote the relationship depend in part on each group's “buyer” values that determine their criteria for selecting a law firm. So before you can launch your marketing tactics, you need to craft appropriate messages for your different publics.

For your current clients, your message should validate and reinforce their decision to use your attorneys' services. For prospects, your message must be designed to position you as a credible, experienced professional. That message must also clearly state who you are, what you do and what benefits potential clients can expect from hiring you.

Journalists and other media conduits will value you if you know their “beat” and, bring trends and other worthwhile information to their attention. For example, if your firm's expertise is in aviation financ-

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ing, forecasting what the credit crunch will mean to aviation financing could be attractive to the media. Sending press releases and communicating with the media in a way that provides value requires careful planning, strategy, and follow-up.

How Do You Reach Them?

Once you have identified your publics and honed specific messages for each group, your next step is to determine how you are going to reach them. What are the communication channels that will make them most receptive to your message? Publics are best accessed by various and often different channels including email blasts or blogs, phone calls, hard-copy reprints of articles you have published, newsletters, business breakfasts, seminars, open houses, receptions, trade show

displays and various other special events. Although different publics respond to different communication channels, you will increase your chances of making a memorable impression if you use a mix of methods, for example, sending a reprint one time and then an email blast on another occasion.

As the second word in “public relations” suggests, building relationships with particular constituencies is also an important component of a campaign. This includes pro bono work through which you give back to the community and support a particular group, such as Public Counsel. Another vehicle to build a relationship is sponsorship. By sponsoring a fundraiser or making a donation, you are not only communicating that you support the orga-

nization’s cause or goals, but also that you want to do business with the group and its members.

Define Your Way to Success

The next time you hear the term “public relations” think about the publics that are important to you. Determining the *who* – the targets of your public relations – is the first key to developing an effective marketing plan. Once you know *who* they are, determine *what* it is you want to tell each group, and finally the *how* of the best channels for communication with each public. A third definition of public relations is “the degree of success obtained in achieving a favorable relationship with the public.” If you have done a good job defining your *who*, *what* and *how*, you are on your way to success.