

## Small Firm, Big Impact -- PR that packs punch

*By Susan Van Dyke*

Public relations activities have largely been overlooked by law firms. Some hardly look beyond ads or lunch when engaging in business development tactics. But there's so much more.

For the small firm, sensitivity to efficiency, effectiveness and budget are imperative. Doing things on a whim can be disastrous.

Instead, choose your industry or client group carefully and go big. Lawyers and other professional staff of a firm can get on boards, go to industry events, be seen, become the go-to person, write like mad, contribute to your website, and if you must, advertise strategically (see sidebar).

But avoid isolated marketing activities and go for a cumulative effect by layering your efforts with a variety of tactics.

First, some definitions. Public relations and advertising are different animals. PR strives to subtly influence attitudes and opinions among stakeholders – most often done through the media, known as publicity. Advertising, on the other hand, is paid and controlled ad space that will air or be published at a specific time or date.

Now let's spill the beans on what's going to bring you the biggest bang for your... well ... beans.

**Seek and speak.** Media relations, the most common effort on the PR front, is rarely initiated by law firms large or small.

Build a trusting relationship with freelance and staff writers to create a win-win situation. Invite them to your seminars and events, alert them to important decisions and translate into plain English when necessary, and introduce them to agreeable news-making clients whenever possible.

Scooping the lion's share of media attention are lawyers listed in the CBABC-produced Media Contacts booklet. Chairs and co-chairs and their contact details are listed by section for quick reference. Writers and reporters sprinting to a deadline will find the quickest route to a qualified source. Is a member of your firm listed?

Get media training if your lawyers are averse to speaking to the media – remove the fear and outline the value media coverage will bring.

Convinced you've got a great story? Writing a media release is not difficult. The challenge is understanding what to communicate and how. Get your point across clearly and concisely, keeping the audience needs and interests in mind. It's all about the story.

And your beans will go further here. An article is read with more credibility than an ad. In fact, PR professionals value editorial at three times the rate of advertising.

**Assemble a database.** For efficiencies sake you'll need one. The gold-plated variety isn't necessary; there's probably a program on your computer desktop that will do the trick. You'll save tons of billable hours (think holiday cards) and attract more work with this simple tool than probably anything else. Create fields for client industry and matter type (trust me, this isn't rocket science) and you're ready to roll out targeted, relevant and timely bulletins painlessly and affordably.

**Write, speak, shake.** Step up to the plate – use your pen, pearly words or a firm handshake – but squirrel yourself away at your peril. Build referral sources one person at a time, but reach them *en masse* if you can. Target key publications with topic suggestions that are of interest to their readers. Volunteer to pull together a panel of clients and lawyers for their next conference and always ask for the attendance list for future follow-up and inclusion on your database.

**Shrink your name.** Likely a traumatic move, but it will improve your odds of being remembered. A shorter name is easier on your marketing materials, your branding efforts and ultimately, your marketing budget. If your firm is known by a shorter name, that's a good indication you're ready for a change.

**Beef up your website.** Canadians are among the highest users of the Internet. Representative work must be listed and up to date. Anything less is compromising your ability to attract work -- and yes, you can do it without disclosing client names. Updated biographies should include quality photos and contact information.

**Recycle everything.** An article can morph into a presentation, a posting on your website (biography and publications pages), firm newsletter, industry publication, a client alert or even in-house training. Editorial coverage can be clipped and sent to clients and, again, posted on the firm's website. Stretch each opportunity for maximum value.

**Lunch with purpose.** Invite clients, referral sources, other professionals and lawyers from large firms to join you. Ask questions and note opportunities for follow-up. Gather a cohesive – but non-competitive -- working group together and share business development strategies. Make it a monthly lunch meeting for a year and you'll be astonished at what you've accomplished over a sandwich.

**Polish up (or rescue) your image.** Take a critical look at your corporate stationery, your website, PowerPoint templates, and e-mail signature blocks (located at the bottom of out-going e-mail messages). They should present a unified look and feel and project a compelling image that appeals to your prospective clients.

**Ask your clients.** Most of all, remember your efforts are directed to your prospective clients, not your own lawyers. Create an advisory panel of clients (hint: this is an effective client retention strategy) and pepper them with questions, present your ideas and collect *their* comments. Make it a relaxed and enjoyable gathering – remember, these are clients. Now you're on the right track and it hasn't cost you a hill of beans.

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## **Sidebar: Advertising tips and tricks**

Advertising can get expensive. Factor in the time or resources it takes to produce good art and strong copy and it gets even pricier. Choose familiar publications that reach your target market. Ask for good positioning, discounts, and free layout services. You can have most publications produce your ad free of charge – but do it with caution and plenty of time to make any necessary changes.

Strong creative ads needn't be big. A small hard-working ad that appears frequently and in the same spot (not all publications will do this) will get decent exposure. Run an ad once or twice (exception: announcement ads) and you've just donated the firm's hard earned money -- unless you have a strong "call-to-action" (i.e. "Call us by Nov. 15 for a free will"). Ad rates go down as frequency increases, but do negotiate with your sales rep for more space or free colour. And every ad should list your website address.

Bad ads are even costlier. Ads that are text-heavy, lack creativity, and send the wrong message will blend in and rarely generate interest and in some cases, will actually damage your image. When in doubt, test your ad on your target market.

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