

Playing for All the Marbles with Law Firm PR

BY EDWARD C. MILLER & JACQUELINE C. GULOTTA
NORRIS McLAUGHLIN & MARCUS, P.A.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A PUBLIC RELATIONS (PR) plan at any law firm involves a variety of programs designed to promote its image, services and of course, its attorneys. After all, a law firm's product is its people. Once the nuggets of public relations gold are sifted out, tagged and sorted, a successful PR strategy can serve as one of a law firm's most efficient and cost-effective marketing activities.

Whether or not your firm employs in-house marketers or consultants, public relations should play an important role. Marketing departments can assist lawyers with identifying PR opportunities that they often miss, but recognizing a newsworthy story often begins at the individual attorney level.

If you do have access to a marketing department, you have the advantage of working with people who are trained in identifying PR opportunities. A visit to your marketers will allow you to share your own personal interests and triumphs, sparking in them stories to pitch to the media. Over time, the development of a strong relationship between you and your marketing department will benefit you by enabling your marketers to spot additional, personalized PR opportunities.

For those who are now asking themselves, "What do I have to say about myself that anyone would find interesting?"—remember that marketers can turn a YMCA soccer coach into a community hero and a dog-bite case into a new-found public safety trend.

A marketer's job is to take accomplishments and link them to societal developments and consumer demands—start by sharing your interests, new clients or

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cases, speaking engagements, awards, and unique personal stories with them or your fellow attorneys.

Beyond the individual attorney level, practice areas provide additional PR opportunities. Marketing professionals keep tabs on the overall direction of these groups, but it is important that attorneys keep them abreast of new developments.

A good example of an emerging practice group PR opportunity occurred when the chair of the immigration group at Norris McLaughlin & Marcus recently teamed up with members of the white-collar criminal and labor and employment groups. These attorneys formed a crisis response team after recent rumors of raids by Immigrations and Customs Enforcement became rampant in the media.

As the firm's marketing department, we prepared a press release about the group to be sent to targeted media, as well as clients. The group was also announced internally so that the firm's sales force (the attorneys) could begin to spread the word.

Finally, PR opportunities can be found at the firmwide level. Some examples could include a merger, firm award or charitable event. Marketing departments will pick up on these types of events, but those attorneys without in-house marketers should be sure to watch for them. Events at this level are often crucial to grounding a firm's image in its surrounding communities.

Marketing department or not, there are several PR tools that everyone can use to present a public relations idea to the media. These include press releases, pitch letters, ghost-written articles and personal media contact.

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While *press releases* may just seem like quasi-journalistic abstracts, they present an important forum for marketers or attorneys to demonstrate their persuasive side. Press releases can be used for the normal stream of accomplishments throughout the course of the year. They include the who, what, where, why and how of a media-worthy event, and typically provide some basic background information.

Pitch letters are most effective for more impressive stories because they allow for lengthier arguments as to why a story is important and to which readership it will most appeal. Formatting these as a cover letter or e-mails with a specific greeting and a salutation from the sender makes them more personal.

When a story requires substantial “inside” or historical information that attorneys or their marketers may only have access to, a *ghost-written article* is best. These articles are appropriate for issues such as a change in senior management or a story related to the organization's culture.

Attorneys should work hard to establish *personal contact* with editors, reporters and writers so they can call them up to request their presence when appropriate.

If your company is holding a family bowl-a-thon to raise money for a local charity, someone may consider calling up Janet at the local newspaper to request that

she stop by for some quotes or a photo. If you are aware that a reporter is looking for an expert in a particular area in which you or a coworker is well-versed, a *phone pitch* or *interview* may be the best option.

“To maximize a firm's media relations efforts, attorneys have a responsibility to establish and maintain relationships with key journalists. Attorneys should make themselves available to offer not just commentary for attribution but also information and insight on background, and they should be proactive in calling the reporter with ideas or trends that meet the reporter's interests and beat,” says Jack Gutt, principal of the New York PR firm, Vistance Group, LLC. “Doing so should result in a long-term mutually beneficial relationship that publicly strengthens the attorney's and, most importantly, the firm's intellectual leadership.”

Law firms of all sizes should start small by promoting new staff appointments, assignments and completed projects. You'll know you've struck gold when your firm begins to see its public relations efforts converted into tangible media results, ultimately leading to a return on investment that not even an attorney can argue with. ■

Edward C. Miller is chief marketing officer and Jacqueline C. Gulotta is a marketing assistant for Norris McLaughlin & Marcus, PA. (www.nmmlaw.com).