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**Law Firms Should Increase Attention
To Public Relations Efforts**

By Art Samansky and Eric Samansky

More attorneys and law firms appear to be spending considerable time and money focusing on marketing and advertising efforts. But far fewer appear to have focused on what is variously termed public relations, public affairs, or communications. That is our observation based upon random conversations and a cursory review of various websites and press releases.

In the current environment, with heightened attention from the media, and others, to often-complex legal issues, the need for a better understanding of, and attention to, public relations may be of special benefit in helping lawyers be recognized as sources of authoritative information and commentary. In short, more effective public relations may help a firm build a wide and well-known reputation as an authority in specific areas.

However, in the same way lawyers are advised not to serve as their own attorneys, so too, trying to be their own public relations practitioner is fraught with potential danger for the attorney, the law firm, and clients. It also may mean missed opportunities.

Effective PR requires specialized skill, knowledge and experience.

Firms Offer Various Disciplines, Portfolio Of Skills

Just as there are different legal disciplines, there are different disciplines and skills in public relations. Among them are:

- media relations,
- investor relations,
- internal/employee communications,
- community relations, and
- executive communications, including speech and presentation writing.

There also are among PR practitioners those who include in their portfolio one or more of the following specializations:

- strategic communications development,
- message development,
- crisis communications counsel,
- guidance on, and creation of, websites which will be viewed as valuable resources for clients, prospects, and the media,
- annual report, brochure, newsletter, and other collateral-material writing,
- training lawyers and clients to deal effectively with media, and
- presentation and speech training.

Some of these disciplines and skills are of special importance to a firm itself, and some also may be of value to the firm's clients.

Given that landscape, the primary questions to be answered by firms of all sizes are: why care about PR and what PR is wanted or needed for the lawyer, the firm, and possibly the client?

Understanding and effectively using the right PR discipline may be important to help position a lawyer or a firm as an authority in a specific area with the media. Similarly, the firm may be better positioned as an authority in specific areas with the current and prospective client community, peers, and various professional and community organizations, among others.

For those lawyers who work for companies and corporations, especially in areas such as banking, securities, insurance, communications, and transportation, or those who represent such businesses, the image of the practitioner or the firm with the appropriate regulatory audience also may be a key issue.

Getting It Right Starts With A Strategic Communications Plan

Getting it right from the start clearly is important. And that begins with a strategic communications plan and formal message development. That, because, before speaking with the media, or other audiences, it is essential the attorney or law firm understand the firm's messages, what the firm's brand is, and what the firm or attorney wants to be known for, starting with the type of client.

Only after the attorney or firm understands the messages and strategic objectives can the law firm develop an effective public image, an efficient marketing and advertising plan, and even a 'go-to website.'

Having that strategic plan, and the law firm's messages, in place also helps in understanding how to work with the media -- both mainstream and trade, broadcast and cablecast, print-based and internet-based -- and other audiences, from a firm perspective.

Simply conducting media relations -- whether pro-actively or reactively -- merely for the sake of seeing the firm's name in print, generally isn't useful or wise.

The key is to think about communications strategically.

Don't give credence to the hackneyed "I don't care whether the news is positive or negative, as long as they spell my name right." Negative news is never good and can be extraordinarily harmful. It also can be costly to overcome -- if at all possible. A lawyer or a firm always should care about the public's perception.

One Size Doesn't Fit All

In addition, lawyers should recognize one PR-size doesn't fit all: the needs of a big law firm are different from a small law firm, and both are likely different again from a solo practitioner.

In selecting a public relations consultant, deciding that an inside communications team is needed, or perhaps a combination of both an internal staff and outside consultant is useful, there are a range of questions to be answered.

These include, but aren't limited to:

- what is the PR professional's menu of skills and which of those skills does the firm need going forward?
- how will the skills of the public relations professional or PR firm fit and meet the on-going or specific needs of the firm, or the needs of a specific client in a specific case?
- what will each cost? (Some items are bundled and some are unbundled. For example, fees for media and presentation/speech training programs are almost always separate from general public relations counsel and basic services. Likewise, speechwriting fees and specialized editing services are often unbundled.)
- can an in-house person handle the bulk of the day-to-day demands and use a consultant for specialized issues and counsel, or is a full service firm required?

- where, geographically, does the law firm need the PR assistance -- is the law practice localized, or spread regionally, nationally or even internationally? (Depending upon the answer to this question, and some of the others already cited, a local, regional, national or global PR firm may be needed. Alternatively, consideration should be given to whether hiring individual firms in different regions, or individual firms with different specializations -- getting the best of the best in each place -- is the better course.)

Once the decision is made to engage a PR practitioner, action to implement that plan should be taken quickly and not left on the back burner.

The sooner a PR consultant is in place, the faster an attorney can start the positioning process. It could mean new business.