

PR Skills Boost Law Firms

Janet Ellen Raasch

Janet Ellen Raasch is a writer, ghostwriter, copyeditor and blogger at [Constant Content Blog](#) who works closely with professional services providers – especially lawyers, law firms, legal consultants and legal organizations – to help them achieve name recognition and new business through publication of newsworthy and keyword-rich content for the web and social media sites as well as articles and books for print. She can be reached at (303) 399-5041 or jeraasch@msn.com.

A law firm that wants to position and maintain its brand in the marketplace has two options. It can pay a considerable amount to get its name before the public via advertising and sponsorships. Alternatively (and often additionally) it can “earn” an enhanced reputation via skillful use of public relations.

Public relations is defined as a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.

One of the best ways for law firms to build these relationships is through the media, which often serve as gatekeepers between organizations like law firms and their publics like clients, potential clients and referral sources, as well as internal audiences like the firm’s lawyers, management and staff.

Earned media is more credible and powerful than paid advertising, because it brings with it the objective endorsement of the third-party media outlet that has vetted it and decided that it is newsworthy.

However, public relations does not come with the same amount of control as advertising. Once the media begin to work on a story, a law firm has little control over how the story actually turns out. Plus, there is no guarantee that the story will appear. If implemented carefully, however, a good public relations media policy brings much reward.

This article is based on a presentation on public relations media strategies by Sarah Hogan and Cori Streetman to the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the [Legal Marketing Association](#). Hogan and Streetman are principals at [Barefoot Public Relations](#) in Denver. The event took place Feb. 12 at Sullivan’s Steakhouse in LoDo, Denver.

Crafting a Newsworthy Story

The first step in a successful public relations media policy is understanding what editors and reporters want - and crafting a story idea that meets their needs. To pique the interest of editors and reporters, story ideas must be newsworthy. They must also be authentic.

It is the job of editors and reporters to uncover and report the news, which is defined as information their readers, viewers or listeners need to know in order to make good decisions about their personal or professional lives, or their businesses.

In spite of how proud lawyers are about a particular development, news rarely consists of the internal workings of a law firm. Generally, the mainstream media do not care about legal awards and rankings, internal promotions, new practice groups (unless related to an emerging trend) or anniversaries (unless the firm is doing something unique and community-oriented to observe the anniversary).

What makes an idea or an event newsworthy in the eyes of a media gatekeeper? Usually, some combination of these characteristics:

Proximity – The focus of a newsworthy story idea will be local, either geographically local (of interest to a local or regional publication and audience, like *The Denver Post*) or “niche” local (of interest to those with shared legal issues, like a construction trade publication).

Prominence – A newsworthy story idea will feature someone or some event with “star power” – perhaps a well-known lawyer or client, or a connection with a front-page legal matter.

Timeliness – A newsworthy story idea will feature “breaking news” or a timely reaction to breaking news. The first one to pitch a timely idea is the most likely to get the media opportunity. By nature, lawyers like to study every aspect of an issue before making a statement. This is a common mistake. By the time the lawyer feels ready, a dozen more-nimble law firms have already pitched the idea.

Significant – A newsworthy story idea will directly concern a large number of people or, alternatively, a smaller number of very influential people (like lawmakers, a regulatory board or general counsel).

New or unusual – A newsworthy story idea will involve something new that has not been covered before. Also newsworthy is a fresh or local perspective on an existing national or regional news story.

Human Interest – A newsworthy story idea will have a personal face that sparks an emotional connection. Readers, viewers and listeners identify with other people and their problems. Abstract concepts, like an obscure change to a law, must be connected to the real-world problems of a person or number of persons who will be impacted by that change.

Conflict – A newsworthy story idea should involve conflict. A journalism maxim states: “If it bleeds, it leads.” This can be literal blood, like a crime story, or it can be figurative blood, like a disagreement over gun control, gay marriage or a court case (which by nature involves conflict).

Trends – A newsworthy story idea often involves a local “take” on a regional, national or international trend that has been in the news. How will the Affordable Care Act, passed in Washington, D.C., affect the ability of local employers to grow larger than 50 employees?

Visual aspect – Reporters are particularly attracted to stories with a visual component – a compelling still photo for print, for example, or video footage for television. Radio reporters like stories with sound.

Preparing Your Experts

The second step in a successful media policy is preparing the experts within a law firm who will be the media sources to flesh out a particular story idea. After all, it does no good to promise a good story idea to the media and then fail to deliver a credible source. Once that happens a few times, a firm will lose credibility for any story idea it pitches going forward.

Once the firm has a good story idea, determine which lawyers are best-qualified to speak with the media. They should be lawyers who actually work at the cutting edge in the subject area, but also lawyers who know how to work with the media -- and are willing to do so. Since editors and reporters must meet deadlines, the lawyer-experts must be available to respond quickly to media calls.

Before pitching a story idea, carefully prepare the selected expert or experts so that they can abide by firm, legal ethics and media rules without getting flustered. Know what the message is. Anticipate what a reporter might ask -- including negative questions. Devise a number of concise quotes or "talking points" and practice them ahead of time. Be prepared to fit the story into a larger context.

Make sure lawyer-experts understand that a reporter in search of balance in a news story will talk to other experts as well. Almost always, the lawyer will be just part of the story, not the entire story. Be prepared with a list of other contacts and resources on the subject to provide to a reporter. A reporter will always appreciate and return to sources that help them write a good, well-researched story.

Law firms should create and distribute to the media a series of "subject matter expert guides." A guide can be prepared for each lawyer who is willing and able to interact with the media. It includes a one-paragraph bio as well as a list of newsworthy story ideas or areas of interest a particular lawyer can address, such as marijuana laws, homeowners associations or eminent domain.

A subject matter expert guide includes a photo, and is also a good place to list the lawyer's management role within the law firm and willingness to speak out on legal industry topics, such as associate pay, lateral moves of partners or law firm mergers. Expert guides also serve as great internal tools for generating ideas for blog posts, alerts, white papers or tweets.

Before speaking with the media, lawyers should be familiar with the legal ethics rules governing profession-specific issues like client confidentiality, conflicts and what can and cannot be said when discussing a case in litigation.

Making Your Pitch to the Media

Following development of a newsworthy story idea and selection of a qualified lawyer-expert, the third step in a successful media policy is to actually pitch the story idea.

Identify the best media outlets for a newsworthy story idea. These could be mainstream print, television or radio; "niche" trade or business publications; or any number of online content sites.

Once an outlet has been identified, determine the most appropriate reporter within that outlet. Some publications still assign certain editors and reporters to specific beats, but many more currently use generalists. Find out who has written in a related subject area before. Reference the firm's familiarity with the reporter's work. Customize the pitch. Never pitch an idea as an "exclusive" unless it is actually an exclusive. Use exclusives to reward reporters who have treated the firm well.

Many reporters prefer to receive pitches by email. Others prefer a phone call. A pitch for a newsworthy story differs from a press release. It is a "hook," not the whole story. A pitch is brief, factual and demonstrates why the idea is newsworthy. It avoids hyperbole, which alienates reporters. It offers a credible expert, a photo opportunity, a promise to follow up and accurate "live" contact information.

A law firm should never assume that the fact that it buys paid advertising in a publication means that the publication's editors and reporters will accept its pitch for an article idea. Most publications draw a clear line between advertising content and editorial content. A legitimate media outlet will be highly offended if the firm hints at a "pay to play" arrangement where none exists.

During the Interview

Once a reporter has responded to a law firm's pitch, the subject matter expert must understand his or her rights in the interview process.

Before an interview, ask about the context of the story. Ask if a list of questions can be reviewed ahead of time (sometimes a reporter will provide this). Do some background research on the reporter, to determine the tone of the reporter's usual work. Find out who else might be interviewed for this particular story. Do some research to understand these sources' points of view.

Ask for permission to videotape or record the interview yourself or, alternatively, for a tape/copy of the interview. There may be a charge associated.

During the interview, an interviewee has the right to courteous treatment. A subject matter expert can refuse to answer questions that are pejorative or insulting, but should remain courteous when doing so. A legal expert can refuse to answer questions that involve client confidentiality, conflicts or litigation, but can and should refer the interviewer to another source who might be able to provide the answer.

An interview subject has the right to request that difficult or confusing questions be re-phrased. The interviewee who is not sure of something should always be comfortable saying, "I don't know that answer right now, but I will find out for you." Then, get back to the reporter as soon as possible.

Finally, a legal expert should never ask to review an article before it goes to print. The expert can offer to do so in order to help the reporter, but should never make a direct request.

Lawyers and law firms are often needlessly concerned about working with the media. With a clear understanding of what is newsworthy, a list of qualified subject matter experts, the right pitch to the right reporter and an understanding of the interview process, media relations can be a great way for law firms to earn an enhanced reputation within a targeted marketplace.