



## **The Missing Link: How Lawyers Are Failing to Maximize Public Relations in Their Practices**

By Paramjit Mahli

The old adage that the more things change, the more they remain the same still holds some truth. Public perceptions continue to have a strong hold in society. Visibility and credibility still go a long way in cementing business relationships and deals. Yet many law firms still don't quite embrace public relations initiatives. The mystery about what public relations is remains. Far too many attorneys fail to understand how public relations works. Wrong assumptions are made such as thinking that an advertisement promoting the firm counts as PR or that only lawyers who do high-profile litigation cases receive media attention. Nothing could be further from the truth. Every day hundreds of small- and medium-sized law firms are quoted in widely read publications, raising awareness of their firms and gaining credibility as experts in the marketplace. Firms that don't realize this suffer from missed opportunities to attract new clients.

The truth of the matter is that public relations is at the heart of every good marketing plan for ALL law firms. The credibility associated with getting cited in the press or being seen as an expert is very hard to buy in advertising dollars.

Why is PR so powerful? It's "earned media" in the form of being quoted in a news story, rather than "paid media" in the form of an advertisement or advertorial. An old friend with a senior position in sales who worked in the advertising department of the Journal of Commerce explained it to me simply: If a half-page ad in the business section is worth \$15,000; a story of the same size on the front page is worth roughly five times that much. Advertising professionals will disagree with me on this and it's their job, but here's a better benchmark: ask yourself: Do you buy The Economist/Wall Street/CFO Journal for the punch and perspective of the articles, or for the wide variety of advertisements in the publication?

Bottom line, advertising is publicity that is paid for. The lawyer or law firm controls the final product—the exact words and when and where the advertisement or advertorial appears.

According to the incoming president of the Council of Public Relations, the U.S. public relations business will be a \$4.4 billion industry by 2014, up from \$3.4 billion this year.

Showcasing legal expertise through consistent public relations is a powerful business development tool that brings visibility and, more importantly, credibility, which ultimately leads to more business. Public relations initiatives can help a law firm maintain/improve its image, increase brand recognition, bring in new clients and position it or its practice groups as thought leaders and experts in key target markets.

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The most common reasons cited by attorneys for not incorporating public relations into their marketing include not understanding the media, not having the skill set, the cost and time. The irony, of course, is that both groups need each other for their work. Reporters are continually seeking sources for their stories, and attorneys need to get more than their qualifications out in the market place. In other words, they need to get known, liked and trusted in their target market.

Here are a couple of things to bear in mind when considering public relations:

### **Who should handle PR?**

That really depends where the firm is starting from and what the firm's long-range strategic objectives are. Public relations can be handled in-house by one or more lawyers, externally by a consultant or agency, or by the two working in tandem. Typically, responsibility for media relations often falls to a marketing department or administrator. Most large firms with very public profiles have staff devoted exclusively to media relations, but they also work with public relations agencies. Like most disciplines, public relations is not rocket science but requires both practical and people skills. Having a background in journalism equips one to have a proactive approach to public relations rather than waiting for the press to call you.

So how do you look for external help to either supplement in-house initiatives or outsource them? First, let's be clear: legal marketing is an exploding area. There are loads of subpar PR firms. The trick is to find a gem among the crowd. Remember, the goal is to land positive and meaningful mentions of partners/lawyers in targeted publications that clients and prospects read or watch. If your new PR partner spends three months getting to know you, dissecting your "value proposition" or learning how the legal industry works without sending out a single pitch or press release, money has been wasted. Typically, within the first month, a good PR firm should prove its grasp of your business and formulate a strategy in writing that details explicitly whom it will target and what message it will communicate.

The services should include rooting out the most scintillating story angles (this requires some elbow grease and full participation of law firms) and matching those up with the most receptive media organizations. The hows of this will vary depending on the experience of the PR agency or consultant. For example, given the Obama administration's current efforts to extend the Bush tax cuts, tax lawyers should be working at a feverish pace with a public relations agency to pitch stories to dailies and industry publications.

Public relations retainers vary depending on experience, size and location of the agency. For large law firms, retainers will range from \$30,000 to \$5,000-plus a month. This is where the consultant or agency is taking a very proactive approach with the media, looking for opportunities for their clients to be quoted, coming up with story ideas and building a solid track record with reporters who cover the particular area. Then there are other services geared

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specifically for firms who not ready to commit to retainer public relations but want to get their feet wet at a fraction of the cost.

### **Having clear expectations**

Whether you do your own public relations or you work with an agency, having clear expectations from the outset will prevent misunderstandings. But just as important is the firm's commitment from the top down to make the public relations efforts work.

The worst offenses of law firms when it comes to public relations include:

- Expecting to be quoted in top-tier media outlets such as the Financial Times, Wall Street Journal, CNBC and CFO magazine within a month of working with the agency or consultant.
- Taking the backseat, the assumption being that the PR firm must do all the work. Untimely input or no input from attorneys on story ideas and/or the latest legislative developments will impede rather than help public relations professionals pitch stories to reporters.
- Not valuing the work of the PR professionals (Failure to do so, or to understand some of the components of the PR work will make it more difficult to work cohesively as a team.)
- Lack of understanding about the basics of media relations. (The traditional relationship attorneys have with the media contains elements of animosity, most of which is due to a lack of understanding of each other's role.)
- Attorneys not improving their skills, such as honing the delivery of presentations to target groups and practicing interview techniques for speaking with reporters.

### **You can't buy good PR**

Remember, good publicity is literally something you can't buy. Law firms of all sizes realize this and have become increasingly eager to incorporate public relations into their business development and marketing objectives. However, these efforts often fall short. For example, many smaller law firms have office managers handling public relations. Larger firms of 10 or more often assign this task to their marketing managers. A half-baked approach to any form of business development will yield half-baked results. Nowhere can such an approach hurt a firm more than when one of its lawyers talks to reporters without the proper training.

### **About the Author**

Paramjit L. Mahli is the founder of the award-winning SCG Legal PR Network, a service that connects legal experts with reporters nationally and internationally. Mahli has worked in communications for 18 years, with experience in journalism, public relations and teaching in the U.S. and abroad.

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Before she started SCG Legal PR Network, Mahli worked as a producer and reporter for international and domestic news organizations, including the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Financial Post, CNN, CNNfn and The Journal of Commerce, and she spent the last decade consulting law firms on PR and marketing.

Mahli is also Co-Chair of the Communications Committee of the New York Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association (LMA). She also frequently writes for TechnoLawyer and teaches CLEs and teleseminars on topics such as connecting legal experts with reporters, training associates, crisis communication and social media. Ms. Mahli can be reached at [pmahli@scglegalprnetwork.com](mailto:pmahli@scglegalprnetwork.com).

### **About SCG Legal PR Network**

SCG Legal PR Network is a global network that connects lawyers as expert sources with reporters and features a 24/7-accessible database of legal experts from a variety of areas. Its team is comprised of former award-winning journalists whose experience spans over three continents and 30-plus years of experience in the field of journalism and public relations. For more information about the SCG Legal PR Network, please call 212-661-9137 or visit SCG Legal PR Network's Web site at <http://www.scglegalprnetwork.com>.