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Seven P.R. Myths Exposed, And Truths Revealed!

by *Steven A. Meyerowitz*

There are many things that lawyers believe about public relations that simply are not true. Espousing these myths at management committee meetings, or relying on them when instituting a public relations campaign, can be discouraging and wasteful.

One common myth is that any experienced public relations consultant can represent a law firm.

The truth is that one of the most frequent complaints lawyers have about public relations is that p.r. consultants do not understand law, lawyers, law firms, how law is practiced, lawyers' ethical obligations and client sensitivities. By contrast, public relations consultants who are lawyers or who have substantial experience representing law firms recognize that there is a big difference between selling widgets and promoting legal services.

Another myth is that p.r. agents depend on eating, drinking and schmoozing with reporters and editors to get their jobs done.

The fact of the matter is that substance is what's important. Contrary to popular belief, good press does not result from "horse trading" or cutting deals with journalists. Although a certain amount of badgering may provoke a reaction from editors in some instances, it is not the best way to stimulate quality press coverage. Rather, journalists look for solid relevant information. The final results depend on the real value and newsworthiness of what a law firm is seeking to publicize.

A third myth is that when a lawyer is mentioned in an article or news story, the lawyer will likely get a new client.

For a firm that takes the time to carefully design a press program that is suitable to the firm's general character, degree of newsworthiness, client tolerance level and internal capabilities, the benefits can be significant in terms of general exposure, reputation building and business development. This general exposure is particularly important for (1) firms whose names are not well known

(for whatever reason), (2) new firms springing off from older, more established firms and (3) for highly specialized firms. In such cases, extensive press exposure literally can "put them on the map." In such cases, again, press exposure is a way of (1) sending signals to competitors and potential competitors, (2) alerting networks to the new firm's whereabouts and (3) notifying very narrow segments of the market (otherwise very difficult to reach) that a specialized legal service is available from a particular law firm.

For other firms, press coverage can help balance an unbalanced public image or otherwise be valuable in modifying an established image. Effectively projecting a firm can add immeasurably to all marketing efforts, from new business development to recruitment.

But the truth is that there are limitations as to what "ink" can do for a law firm. Unless a law firm (or lawyer) is mentioned as part of a very important (hard news) lawsuit or legal matter, or

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the firm is the subject of an adoring profile article, the firm is not likely to realize any significant amount of new business from the exposure in the near term. Even the big splash (which usually requires considerable resources to generate) does not typically result in new business unless the efforts are sustained. A big mention helps develop a firm's reputation which, of course, is a key marketing asset. But this type of exposure has to be repeated periodically to have the desired effect on the bottom line. Press relations, thus, is a long-term marketing strategy.

A fourth myth is that all that matters is that "they spell my name right."

Just ask James T. Edmunds, Robert L. Payne Jr. and Ronald R. Silverton — whose photographs and names were prominently displayed at the top of the first page of the August 5, 1996 issue of *The National Law Journal* with the date that each was disbarred and the date that each was reinstated — if they were happy with the publicity they received in that article, even though their names were spelled correctly.

There also is a myth that lawyers can control the press.

In doing press relations, a law firm only can exercise a certain amount of control over the press. In some cases, quotes can be taken out of context, factual information may be incomplete and the article may be framed improperly, with the end result being a story that at best does not adequately depict the lawyer and the lawyer's position and at worst presents the position incorrectly and makes the lawyer look bad.

A sixth myth is that the only press worth receiving is from *The New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*.

The fact of the matter is that trade publications (among them banking, inter-

national business, real estate, management, legal and small business) offer law firms many opportunities for visibility among very targeted groups. Many, if not most, accept bylined articles from experts in their respective fields; most accept press releases or cover news items of interest in their field. These publications typically are open to new material. There is little risk courting this group of publications and, generally speaking, firms should not neglect or overlook these opportunities.

A seventh myth is that law firms have nothing special that the media would be interested in writing about.

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Certainly, the easiest way for a lawyer or law firm to get press coverage in widely-circulated business publications is to be involved in a major lawsuit or transaction that is of interest to journalists.

The corollary is that firms that are not typically involved in major matters do not have as many ready-made opportunities for generating or being included in hard news stories in general circulation business publications. But they may be part of actions that may be important or interesting to a specific industry or a specific location.

Moreover, a law firm that does not take advantage of routine events to gen-

erate exposure is overlooking one of the most basic, inexpensive, no-risk ways of getting its name out. This is a base every firm should cover, yet few firms take the time to make this effort. Typical items would include new hires, promotions, professional appointments, firm sponsorship of charitable or civic activities, anniversaries, new office openings, establishing of new departments or practice groups and anything unusual or unique the firm may be doing in the way of management, administration or recruitment. In other words, a firm should look carefully at what is going on inside the firm (significant legal decisions, moves, expansions, staff changes) for news materials.

Law firms also may be able to initiate feature stories in general news or trade publications or make the press aware that they are available for feature stories initiated by journalists themselves on a wide range of topics. One example of a possible feature story could be a story about a law firm's international experiences; another might center on what a firm is doing to enhance its recruitment program. Features might discuss different law firms' approaches to management or they might focus on what a firm does in a particular area of practice. Currently, there is a good deal of editorial interest in these subjects.

It is no myth that a press relations program can help a law firm gain greater visibility among certain targeted market segments. It is no myth that when combined with other components of a firm's marketing program, press relations can contribute significantly to a law firm's bottom-line objectives. But to limit the risk of failure, lawyers should make sure that before they start down the public relations process, they separate myth from truth.