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IN DEPTH: LAW

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Time to speak out

Lawyers are primed for good media relations

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Special to Houston Business Journal

Attorneys such as Johnny Cochran and Mark Geragos are regular fixtures on "Larry King Live" and similar news programs. These media-savvy lawyers clearly understand the importance and power of the media and know how to use it to their advantage. But it's not just attorneys who represent the rich, the famous or the infamous who need to know how to work the press. The ability to communicate effectively with the news media is an essential skill for nearly every attorney.

Many clients rely on their attorneys for advice on what to say to a reporter. Others ask their legal counselors to speak for them. Either way, what's said and reported may be very important to the outcome of a case.

Marketing the firm

Having a solid understanding of the media and first-rate media interview skills can also aid in a firm's marketing efforts -- delivering results at lower cost and with greater credibility than advertising and other forms of marketing. For example, seeing an attorney communicate effectively in the news media, clients may be reassured that their decision to hire him was correct, former clients may reevaluate their decision to go elsewhere, and prospects may decide to take a closer look at the attorney or firm.

In addition, talking to reporters is one way to shape the discussion of issues in the legal profession. Reporters will write their stories with or without any individual attorney's help. If a legal expert is not willing to talk, he shouldn't be disappointed to see an analysis that misses the mark, or be surprised to see the views of a competitor or non-expert represented in the story. Visibility is often seen as leadership, and people like doing business with leaders. Speaking for the legal profession is one way to demonstrate leadership.

To succeed with today's news media:

- Be available. Cultivate relationships with the media to establish credibility and integrity. This does not mean developing friendships with reporters. It does mean being available and being willing to share expertise. Be a source before a client is a subject.
- Say something. If an attorney doesn't want his views misrepresented, he has to talk -- unless the court places restrictions.

In general, "no comment" is the least appropriate and least productive response. According to a recent study, more than 60 percent of Americans believe a person who is charged with a crime is guilty or hiding something when he or his attorney utters those two words. One of the most dramatic changes in the approach of attorneys to media relations over the past two decades has been the shift from refusing comment, to commenting only if asked, to initiating comment.

- State the most important fact at the beginning. People tend to remember most clearly the first thing said, not the last. So begin with your conclusion, then provide details. This approach also best serves reporters, who are trained to write in this style.
- Deliver short, powerful soundbites. When John F. Kennedy ran for president, he could expect to be heard on the evening news for 45 uninterrupted seconds. In the 2000 presidential election, George W. Bush was lucky to get seven seconds. Today, broadcast and print journalists alike prefer 6- to 15-second answers to their questions. Bring a message to life by using stories, examples, illustrations, anecdotes, analogies, compelling data and memorable lines.
- Build trust. Tell the truth. Tell it all. And tell it quickly. Communicate trust with a human face. Issuing a press release is preferable to saying nothing, but having a real person talking on camera means the attorney and his client are willing to be judged for trustworthiness. Enhance trust through empathy, which accounts for half of a person's credibility and is assessed in the first 30 seconds. That's why it's critical to express sorrow, concern or regret in certain circumstances.
- Lose the jargon. Most professionals incorporate the specialized vocabulary of their professions into their communication. Lawyers are no exception. But audiences are generally wary of people who lapse into jargon. Define all technical terms and acronyms. Use language that can be understood by a 12-year-old.
- Anticipate questions. List the questions that are most likely to be asked, including the questions it is hoped no one asks, and develop appropriate answers.
- Be responsive. Journalists work on deadlines.

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