

Business & Careers

Build reputation with help of media relations



Gary Mitchell
The Coach

If your firm isn't using media relations as part of your marketing and business development efforts, you are missing the opportunity to help raise your profile quite affordably.

There are two approaches to media: getting published under your own byline and being quoted in an article written by a reporter or freelancer. Some media accept articles written by you. This is a great way to demonstrate your expertise and you have much more control than an article written by a reporter where you are quoted as an expert. Both are effective at raising your profile and I suggest you commit to both.

Getting published and quoted

To clarify, when I use the term "media," I am referring to media outlets such as the major TV networks (CTV, Global, CBC), business media such as BNN and Bloomberg Canada, daily newspapers across the country, and of course, legal publications.

Lately, real media have come to be labeled as "earned media" because you have to earn your way in by saying insightful and useful things. This is "earned media" as contrasted with advertorial, sponsored content, and other types of hybrid publishing where money changes hands.

In a nutshell, the job of the



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Jana Schilder
First Principles Communication

media is to report the news. "So, the essence of media relations is to help reporters, editors and producers do their jobs. If you make their jobs easy by providing useful and insightful information in a timely way, they will continue to use you as a source," says Jana Schilder managing partner of First Principles Communication, a media relations firm serving the legal industry since 1993.

Value of reputation

Public relations for lawyers and law firms have benefits that are different from marketing and advertising. Being quoted in a major newspaper or a major TV network is still a big deal.

When you and your firm are quoted in the real media, existing clients think that they've made the right choice of law firms. Referral sources, too, take notice of which lawyers are standing up for the profession. And when you and your firm are quoted in the media, prospects (or those sitting on the fence) are compelled to take another look at you and your law firm.

"You cannot buy a reputation, you have to earn it the old-fashioned way by working with the media over years," says Schilder, adding that public relations is a marathon, not a sprint.

When everyone is trying to do more with less, public relations is much more cost effective than

marketing and advertising. Most marketing and advertising programs cost thousands of dollars. Those same dollars will go much farther with public relations. A handful of articles quoting you will help your reputation.

"The nature of news is that you won't get quoted every time you contact a reporter, but over time, reporters will come to know that you 'give good quote' and will return their phone calls within hours," says Schilder.

So, the value of public relations is cumulative: the more you're out there, the more reporters will call you.

Media relations strategy

Just like with your marketing plan, you should create a media relations strategy.

First, understand your firm's media relations policy and work within it.

Second, have a clear understanding of your target audience. Develop a list of media sources that reach your target market. Prioritize your list based on the reach of each source. Understand how each media source operates, (style, tone, approach).

Develop your news idea for each source. Approach the editor of each source with an outline of your idea. Get sign off from them before you develop the entire story. The value of working with a public relations professional is that the good ones have a "nose for news."

They understand the legal industry and "know where the puck is going." They know how reporters, editors and producers think, their preferences and "hot topics."

They can help you craft and hone your proposal for an article so that it stands the best chance of getting a "yes" from a publica-

tion. Public relations is more art than science.

Take media training from a professional. But beware that media relations has changed and that reporters are pushing back on non-answers to specific questions or an obsession with key messages.

Do not approach these sources unless your content is newsworthy, otherwise you could jeopardize future opportunities. "Research what each reporter and publication or news outlet has covered lately. You don't want to pitch the same story idea that they published two weeks ago," says Schilder.

Social media

Leverage your traditional media with your social media. Once you have an article that is favourable and paints you and your firm in a good light, you can put links to it on LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook. You can incorporate the link in a newsletter to clients. You can also start a media section on your firm's website, to act as a permanent record.

Done right, public relations is a great way to build your legal reputation and become an authority for the media, who will call on you with increasing frequency.

Gary Mitchell is the principal at On Trac Coach where he works with lawyers, law clerks and paralegals across Canada helping them to attract more clients and grow their businesses. He is co-founder of 'Legal A Team,' a marketing and management alliance focused on providing big firm support to smaller law firms and solo practice lawyers. His book, "Raindance Two: A Blueprint for Growing your Practice" is now available. He can be reached at gary@ontraccoach.com or 604-669-5235.

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