

# The Declaration

ALA - PHILADELPHIA CHAPTER - NEWSLETTER

**30<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY 1975-2005**



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## PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR LAW FIRMS

by Steven L. Lubetkin, APR, Fellow, PRSA

Law firms are primarily focused on limiting external risks for clients, so it's very common for an attorney to counsel a client to avoid making comments publicly or to the news media that might later be used against the client.

However, the explosive growth of media outlets all hungry for news content has created a 24-hour news cycle, and even if it's appropriate for clients to remain circumspect, this media environment presents opportunities for law firms to devel-

op their own external image focusing on their litigation strengths or other areas of expertise.

### WHAT IS PUBLIC RELATIONS?

Public relations is generally regarded as a management discipline that facilitates a two-way flow of information between an organization and its audiences or constituencies. Public relations practitioners can be valuable pulse-takers for a corporation or law firm in several ways.

PR professionals can give management or partners a candid assessment of how the firm is perceived and what strategies should be employed to enhance the firm's

reputation among constituencies that might be interested in the firm's professional activities.

Decisions to engage a law firm or an attorney, like many other business decisions, are frequently based on intangible factors like reputation or perceived expertise in a practice area.

The astute use of public relations as part of a law firm's business development and marketing activities can help attract clients and referrals and thus further enhance the firm's reputation.

## WHO SHOULD MANAGE LAW FIRM PUBLIC RELATIONS?

Public relations is probably best managed by a professional with experience in that discipline. Many attorneys have this experience in their professional background, but whether managing public relations is the most cost-effective use of their time is a question that each firm will have to answer.

More appropriate is to engage the services of a public relations professional on either a full-time or retainer basis. This frees attorneys to focus on their practices and gives the firm a set of eyes and ears monitoring the firm's reputation without being distracted by the daily legal caseload.

To be effective, the law firm public relations person needs to speak the same language attorneys speak. They don't have to be legal experts, simply able to identify the appropriate legal expert within the firm. Think about the famous story of Albert Einstein testifying in a court case, when an attorney asked him if he knew how many feet were in a mile.

Einstein replied that he didn't know. The lawyer was amazed. "You're one of the most brilliant scientists in the world and you don't know how many feet are in a mile?"

Einstein's reply: "No, I don't, but I know where to look it up."

Part of the public relations person's role in any organization, but particularly in the legal firm, is to help the experts provide explanations in simple terms that can be easily communicated to the audiences you need to reach. These audiences include journalists, government officials, employ-

ees, and other stakeholders.

A good public relations professional also will engage a law firm in a number of proactive opportunities to advance the firm's reputation. These are likely to include some or all of the following:

**Communications Plan:** Development of a specific, detailed communications plan, including identification of target audiences and key constituencies through primary and secondary research, development and refinement of core messages, and a schedule of communications activities to deliver those messages to the selected audiences in the most effective way, using traditional public relations tactics as well as "new media" (i.e., Internet weblogs, podcasts, and other digital media) and other technology-based approaches.

**Positioning Firm Experts with News Media:** The public relations manager will coordinate the firm's contact with the news media, and develop and solicit interview opportunities for attorneys in various practices, with specific, tailored outreach to publications read by key decision-makers who might engage the law firm's services.

**Article development:** The public relations manager will assist lawyers in writing and editing articles for professional journals, trade publications, and mass media. These articles help to expand the firm's reputation with audiences in practice areas it may have targeted for strategic development or expansion.

**News release development and distribution:** The PR manager will write and distribute news releases and audio news

releases to key publications, but a firm should recognize that news releases may not be the appropriate vehicle for every opportunity the firm faces, and the expertise and knowledge of the PR manager will help the firm choose the optimal way to disseminate information in a particular circumstance.

**Outside Speaking Opportunities:** The PR manager will work with marketing and business development staff to help develop a robust list of speaking opportunities for firm attorneys at conferences and meetings that reach key constituencies.

**Media Interview and Presentation Skills Training:** The PR manager, either with in-house expertise, or with the use of outside consultants, will help a firm's personnel prepare for media interviews and public speaking appearances, including preparation of advance briefing materials regarding journalists and audiences.

**Speechwriting:** The PR manager may also help write and edit speeches for attorneys.

## OTHER OPPORTUNITIES

Law firms, because of the concentration of expertise in areas of important public policy, have good opportunities to present their attorneys as opinion leaders in their areas of expertise. Most mainstream publications, as well as many trade and professional journals – both legal publications and those in vertical business categories – publish Op-Ed articles (the name comes from the traditional placement of opinion and commentary on the page "Opposite the Editorial" page). Bylined articles on important topics can become a useful tool

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in a law firm's marketing/ business development arsenal by demonstrating thoughtful, knowledgeable expertise on a topic of importance to a prospective client.

**Newsletter:** A firm's newsletter can be extremely important in marketing the expertise of the attorneys. Useful articles that help clients and prospective clients think about whether they are prepared to confront challenging legal issues could generate inquiries and additional client engagements. A well-produced newsletter is always useful as a "leave-behind" document at conferences and trade shows.

## DON'T FORGET TO PREPARE A CRISIS PLAN

Law firms are not immune from crises that can become public issues. Any kind of criminal activity, such as an assault on a member of the firm or an employee, can become a news media story. A public relations professional will ensure that the firm has established a coherent plan for managing a public relations crisis.

## EXAMPLES OF CRISES THAT BUSINESSES FACE

Here are a few issues that can become a news media crisis for an organization. Depending on the structure of your firm, it might be more or less vulnerable to any one of these.

- Employee layoffs/ downsizings
- Financial results below expectations (publicly held companies)
- Poor employee morale/disgruntled former employees
- Lawsuits against the firm, especially discrimination or harassment claims
- Negative media coverage
- Damaging rumors

- Violent threats or actions by a current/former employee
- On-the-job accidents
- The sudden death of a senior member
- Loss of a major client account
- Government probes or fines
- Damage caused by an Act of God
- Boycotts, strikes or pickets
- The firm as a takeover target

The PR manager will help the firm prepare to deal with these problems if they arise, but the best environment for avoiding negative reputation effect from problems like these is to maintain a strong base of goodwill with each of your key publics.

This means creating open, two-way communications between employees and senior management, and a positive reputation for quality work.

## ELEMENTS OF THE CRISIS PLANNING PROCESS

The crisis planning process might include:

- Annual vulnerabilities analyses.
- A comprehensive crisis-management plan.
- Annual crisis-simulation practice.
- Easy-to-understand company policies and policy handbooks.
- Comprehensive new-employee orientation.
- A culture of following counsel from highly regarded and competent professionals.

A good example of a comprehensive crisis communications plan is found in Pincus, J. David., and J. Nicholas. DeBonis. *Top Dog*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994. Pincus describes a model for management behavior in a crisis he calls the CCOS Model for

CEO Communications (p.128). This model is composed of the following behaviors:

- Consistency – Aligning CEO words and actions and internal/external messages
- Compassion – Being empathetic to employees (constituencies) concerns by listening sensitively to their feedback
- Organization – Integrating CEO communication with other managerial organization wide communication, matching sources, messages, and media.
- Selectivity – Strategically employing the CEO-communicator for maximum impact and to reinforce other managers' communications.

Like the practice of the law itself, public relations is part art and part science, but in partnership with the legal professionals in your firm, it can help the firm advance its business development goals while enhancing the public's impression of the firm's expertise, integrity, and authenticity. ★

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