

The power of PR

James Darley proposes a new coalition of wig & pen

The quest for new clients is never-ending. In this, lawyers are no different from any other business. Marketing and promotion are as essential to the running of a firm of solicitors as to a stationery supplier. The vehicle by which new instructions arrive is generally the referral, and encouraging referrers has to become a way of life.

How law firms go about this, however, may take a little more care and creative thought than it would for a stationer. It is not difficult to get things wrong and face misunderstanding and criticism.

The more savvy law firms have accepted the challenge of marketing, defined their branding and distinctive positioning, and refined their online presence and offline materials. Some have sought the specialist external input of graphic designers, ad-men and PR consultants. Others have built up their in-house resources with business development and PR appointments.

The management of relationships and reputation is rightly recognised as a vital aspect of the responsibilities of the practice as a whole, while remaining a personal role also of each partner. What is much less understood is the value that the public relations function can add to client work.

This does not challenge or erode the trust between lawyer and client, which is a vital aspect of the successful and enduring relationships that characterise some of the most satisfying and successful legal assignments. Clients' dependency for advice in matters that extend beyond the legal can be encouraged—to their benefit, and the lawyers'. There is, however, the opportunity to enable a medium or large law firm to expand the scope of its counselling as well as the effectiveness of its work in certain key activities.

So, with the benefit of long experience of working alongside solicitors from prominent practices and barristers from respected chambers, mostly in their professional capacities but sometimes over their private difficulties, here are ideas for lawyers with the vision to see

that some aspects of their client work could be improved by bringing in specialist PR support.

Crisis & acute issue management

Service which draws upon specialist public relations and public affairs capability could be an essential ingredient in the successful management of a high risk situation. The right PR consultancy has direct experience of engaging and working with lawyers to bring broader communication skills to crises. Such a firm will offer insights into techniques for acute issue management, many of which would be relevant to the special needs of companies or individuals facing high profile legal action.

The court of public opinion

Just as litigation is not law, so media relations is not the practice of PR. Yet effective and positive media exposure of an individual or organisation, before and during a case, can manage the context

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of communications and influence the perceptions of the public. Well-marshalled media pressure and the force of public opinion have proved instrumental in bringing about a satisfactory solution to a legal dispute before it ever makes its way to court. Even when a legal battle has been won, the war over reputation may need waging. All too often the real cost at the end of a high profile case will be the verdict in the court of public opinion. Also, as some trial lawyers will be well aware, whatever the *sub judice* restrictions, the media can create a climate of opinion around a case which can have a direct bearing on the success of its eventual outcome.

Beyond the traditional media

Times have changed. A huge amount of information is now being shared

and transmitted online by common-interest groups. Understanding how social media activity can affect the reputational outcome (and even the legal outcome) of high profile litigation, and of controversial issues and crises—as well as key client relationships, and knowing the techniques of effective response and containment, can be critical weapons in the public relations armoury.

Broadening the appeal of planning issues

In an increasingly inflexible and over-regulated town planning environment, a PR firm with specialist knowledge and experience can offer proven expertise in intelligence gathering and deploying the influence of communities, opinion leaders, politicians and the media upon the outcome, supporting planning consultant and lawyer within a professional team that is concentrating on process. The distinctive role of the PR firm will be to engage with councillors, manage public engagement meaningfully, particularly in order to harness the normally silent majority's typically neutral or open-minded opinion, encourage media to see the big issue of the outcome rather than focus on the controversy and if necessary to bring higher political and wider business interests to bear.

Referral

There is another benefit to working with a PR company. Referrals! In recent years my firm has passed numerous assignments to a small number of law firms in this country. These have ranged from comparatively minor, to major engagements with seven figure fees.

In an ever-more complex and regulation-burdened world, almost invariably there is a need for the PR to bring in legal opinion: another good reason, in enlightened self-interest, for lawyers to think about building relationships with public relations professionals.

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