

5 Beliefs About Law Firm PR That Need to Be Retired

by Debra Pickett

One of the best parts of my job as a strategic advisor to law firm leaders is celebrating with them when our work to promote their attorneys and practice groups pays off in the form of a splashy feature article in the business press or an award for one of their up-and-coming lawyers. Not only is it wonderful to deliver great news to our clients, but often it is not until these moments that managing partners and CMOs truly understand what is possible for their firms and how we can help them achieve it.

But some firms never get to experience these victories because unfortunate beliefs about public relations limit their engagement with the professionals who could make a real difference in business development and recruiting. It's time to "retire" these five outdated notions about law firm PR:

"Our managing partner speaks for the firm, so we don't need outside support."

Firms with a prestigious history are proud of the reputation they have built over the decades, and rightly so. But the marketing methods of the past do not offer a sure path to nurturing and protecting that reputation into the future. Your firm likely plays in multiple markets, whether regionally, nationally or globally, which means you are not the same firm in Chicago that you are in Toronto. The specifics of each market require a tailored message. Though every firm is aiming for a unified narrative, a firm's reputation is actually a collection of the different stories it tells to these different audiences. Relying on a managing partner to represent all the facets of a firm's identity almost guarantees the firm will miss opportunities to connect with prospects whose needs fall outside the parameters of this one-size-fits-all message. Sophisticated PR support can help firms navigate the tension between staying true to their brand and selling the services of their attorneys in customized ways.

"Our reputation speaks for itself."

In addition to relying on a single leader to speak for them, firms with esteemed reputations also tend to overestimate the value of their name in today's market, in terms of both business development and recruiting. Younger generations of lawyers and clients are much less likely to be persuaded to buy on name alone, and in some cases they are more skeptical of the top firms because of their elite status. Recent stories of law students refusing to interview with prominent firms that continue to use binding arbitration agreements serve as excellent examples here: name alone was not enough to overcome what these students perceive to be an unfair practice. Firms, no matter where they fall in the rankings, simply cannot rely on a belief that they are entitled to "first dibs" on the clients and recruits they covet.

PR professionals can make the case that a prestigious reputation is well deserved and built on a solid foundation that will withstand the scrutiny of millennials. Pros take nothing for granted, pursuing media opportunities in high-profile outlets as well as the workhorse legal journals that serve a niche but powerful audience: the buyers of legal services. A trove of credible research shows that these key players value and make decisions more often based on what they learn from the niche outlets that some large firms dismiss as small potatoes. Good PR helps you cover all the bases.

“The marketing department handles PR.”

Because marketing and public relations teams collaborate on many projects, and because digital media has so radically changed the landscape of all kinds of communications over the last decade, law leaders don't always have a clear understanding of the differences between these disciplines. Marketing professionals directly promote and sell your firm's services — through activities like writing the RFPs, creating digital and print promotional materials and planning important firm events. With the ongoing responsibility to provide support across practice groups, in-house marketers often do not have the bandwidth to take on more strategic promotional tasks.

That's where outside public relations support comes in. PR professionals are trained to think like journalists (and of course many of them are former journalists) and to help your firm tell its story and maintain its reputation in the market. By building relationships with key members of the media that outlast a single opportunity, PR support can keep the lines of communication open between your firm and your target market. This takes the form of pitching story ideas to reporters, positioning your attorneys as thought leaders and expert sources, helping them place authored content and nominating them for respected awards. Creating these opportunities for attorneys can be game-changing when it comes to business development and recruiting, but the work requires an investment of time and resources that the in-house marketing department often does not have to give.

“All media is created equal.”

Firms with overextended marketing departments and little PR support sometimes rely too heavily on their own communications channels — company website and blog, social media channels — to push out their message. After all, the firm retains total control of the content and the timing, so doesn't that make their own channels superior to others? The truth is that the media world has become far more complex in the past two decades and now includes four types of media: paid (sponsored content), earned (traditional media coverage), shared (social media) and owned (blogs, firm-produced videos, etc.). In order to maximize their position, firms need to understand the difference between, say, content best suited for their blog and content that could benefit from the credibility of traditional media outlets. Relationships with key reporters and outlets are an incredibly important piece of building a firm's brand. They are also time-consuming and tricky to cultivate, and often can be slow to pay off. But when they do, they are worth a hundred sponsored content placements and blog posts.

“We should wait until we get the verdict to enlist PR support.”

Even when law firm leaders do understand the specific skills PR professionals bring to the table, they often wait too long to call them. Strategic-level PR is most effective — and efficient — when the consultants are involved from the beginning and can help your firm create a smart, integrated plan that supports its overall goals. Most firms don't need a full-time PR strategist on their staff, but they should have access to one who understands their business and clients, strengths and vulnerabilities, and how to save the firm from itself in a crisis. Getting out of reaction mode allows firms to take control of the story they want to tell about themselves, now and in the future as they continue to grow and evolve to serve their clients.

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