

Law Firms Ramp Up Their Media Outreach

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Thursday, Jun 19, 2008 --- For many years the idea of having a public relations department was anathema to most law firms. But as they compete ever harder for clients, a majority of big firms have now hired at least one full-time in-house PR professional, and nearly all firms, no matter what size, work at least occasionally with outside PR agencies.

Joshua M. Peck, senior media relations manager at Duane Morris LLP, roughly estimated that 75% of the Am Law 100 firms currently employ in-house PR pros. The number of full-timers at those firms generally varies between one and four, although some of them have more, he said.

"I think that, to some extent, law firms are recognizing that how something will play out in the media has to be one of the criteria for making a given business decision," Peck said.

"Today, more and more big law firms and plaintiffs' groups are demanding seasoned publicists be in-house to handle their media challenges and opportunities," added Mike Ford, media relations manager at Weil Gotshal & Manges LLP. "It's a round-the-clock, marquee position to have filled nowadays."

Jack Trout, the president of Trout & Partners Ltd., an Old Greenwich, Conn.-based marketing firm, attributed the rise in law firm PR hires to the "herd effect."

"Probably what's happened to some degree is that one firm discovers that a competitor firm has an in-house communications guy, and that leads them to say, 'Wait a minute, maybe we should have that,'" Trout said.

He said that even the "white-shoe firms," such as White & Case LLP, have gotten into the act, both with PR and with marketing in general.

"It's getting competitive out there, and a lot of law firms are saying, 'What are we doing to generate business,'" Trout said.

"I think in general, some of them are being dragged kicking and screaming into it," he added.

Law firms did not market at all until 1977, when the Supreme Court ruled in *Bates v. State Bar of Arizona* that lawyers could not be prohibited from advertising.

After that, personal injury firms began advertising in such places as the Yellow Pages, according to Richard Levick, the CEO of Levick Strategic Communications, who has done PR work for over half of the 100 largest U.S. firms.

For their part, the bigger firms didn't begin advertising until 1991, when Howrey LLP launched its “the human side of genius campaign,” he said.

Levick added that local and regional firms started to engage in the same strategy, and that the “avalanche” came soon after.

“Hundreds of firms started engaging in public relations and advertising campaigns,” Levick said.

“They tended to be image ads,” Peck added. “They were not saying, 'Hire us, we're the best.' They were images intended to convey the culture and expertise of the firm via a 'soft sell.'”

Peck said that the first law firms began using outside PR agencies roughly 25 years ago, and that they began hiring in-house PR pros between 10 and 15 years ago.

Nowadays, many large firms hire an in-house team and get outside assistance.

According to Jamie Moss, president of newsPROs, a media relations firm that specializes in the legal profession, top-tier law firms generally use outside PR firms either in place of an internal PR operation, or as collaborators with an internal PR team.

She said that in the former model, the external PR firm takes on all media relations responsibilities, and that in the latter model, the outside firm typically focuses on particular practice areas, routine announcements, specific litigation or deals, or it is brought in to manage crisis communications.

“While outside agency use is not yet going away, it's fair to say this process is still evolving a lot,” Ford said.

Overall, the largest 20 or so law firms now have marketing departments with about 25 employees, and the midsize firms generally have a handful of marketing employees, according to Ren Tucker, search consultant at the Bond Street Group, a staffing organization.

And while some lawyers still resist the trend toward more marketing and media relations, that is falling away, according to Peck.

“Obviously, there's no stigma attached to it, if indeed there ever was,” Peck said.

“Firms are coming to grasp that having a positive view in the public eye is important,” said Ben Jaksich, a consultant with the recruitment firm Michael Page.

Nonetheless, many PR people feel large, general practice firms should be doing even more.

“The defense bar is a full Internet generation behind the plaintiffs bar,” Levick said. “You cannot influence traditional media today unless you're dominating the Web.”

“Law firms have never been the first to market,” he added. “They've always been among the most conservative of industries.”