Public Relations and Marketing for Lawyer Referral Services:

Do-It-Yourself Tips When You Can’t Afford to Hire a Professional

by Patricia E. Raskin and Heather Wagner

EDITOR’S NOTE: This is Part I of a two-part series on LRIS public relations.

How do you get the word out about the good work that your lawyer referral and information service is doing?

Paid advertising on television would be ideal, or maybe some of those life-size posters at bus stops. How about hiring a public relations firm that could come up with a marketing strategy?

Although these are the most obvious and efficient ways to make the public aware of your service, many of us do not have the resources to do any of these things. Instead, we brainstorm within our own communities and share ideas with each other at state bar or American Bar Association meetings and workshops. The following are ideas—some new, some familiar, some with a new twist—that perhaps your lawyer referral service hasn’t yet thought of:

Dealing With Local Media Contacts

Obviously, advertising on television, radio or in the newspaper are effective ways to let the world know about the public services that you are providing. Unfortunately, such advertising also is expensive, sometimes prohibitively expensive even to those with greater resources than you. The solution is to generate as much free publicity for your LRIS as possible. Here are some ways to get your name mentioned in these media without having to pay for it.

Newspaper Contacts

Know who your local newspapers’ legal and consumer reporters are and make sure you inundate them with information about your service. They remain ignorant of what your service does at your peril, not theirs. For example, the Bar Association of San Francisco’s service recently had an unfortunate experience with a consumer reporter who was unaware of the service and neglected to mention it in a full-page article on “How to Find a Lawyer.” After much haranguing, the reporter apologized and agreed to write a short piece about the service in a subsequent edition.

Although in the end the subsequent piece brought the service more attention than if it had been mentioned in passing in the original article, more media contact is clearly necessary. The BASF program now issues more frequent press releases on new developments at the LRIS and pitches to the media public interest stories about LRIS-referred clients who were successful in the pursuit of their legal claims.

When dealing with the media always make sure you have easy access to important information that can catch a reporter’s attention. For example, keep a statistical fact sheet about your service close at hand. Such fact sheets can be updated easily and sent out as part of a press kit. The fact sheet should include a mission statement, the number of calls you receive each month or annually, a description of how the LRIS works, and any details about your service that may be of particular interest. The fact sheets of programs that are a Lawyer Referral and Information Service, like the Milwaukee Bar Association’s program, should indicate that the program refers many callers to other community resources for help with their problems.

The MBA LRIS’ fact sheet also emphasizes the program’s ability to match callers with attorneys in any of over 130 specific areas of law. Your press kit also should include any brochures or flyers that you normally make available to consumers. Do not forget a contact list for more information or an interview. Pre-arrange with a few attorneys on your committee or panel to be available for media questions, and make sure they have right in front of them all the facts that you want them to use!

Often you can interest a reporter in a special story about your LRIS depending on current events. Is labor relations a hot topic in the news? What’s happening in your local community? Call your contacts and tell them how many referrals you have made in that area, and, if possible, tell them about some success stories.

Do not be afraid to be a squeaky wheel. Reporters are used to it, and squeaky wheels get coverage. Finally, do not forget that turnover in the media is high. Reporters and editors turn over rapidly, so make sure the new kid on the block has your information.

Radio & Television

The cost of radio and television advertising in some communities makes this form of advertising...
prohibitively expensive. Underwriting a show focused on legal issues, however, is much cheaper way to get public recognition. The BASF LRIS underwrites a weekly radio program on “Your Legal Rights” as well as a television program, “Legal Currents,” both of which air on public broadcasting. If your bar association sponsors (i.e., pays for) such programming out of the bar association’s marketing budget, make sure your LRIS is mentioned frequently.

Most local television stations have a consumer/investigative reporter on staff. Get to know that reporter and his or her producer. In Milwaukee, one of the regular consumer segments already had a “phone bank” set up on the evening news set where volunteers from an organization relating to that night’s particular story were available to take calls from the viewing audience. A call to the reporter convinced him that, based on the enormous number of calls that the MBA LRIS had taken, the general public needed much more information about consumer law and that his TV station would be doing a great public service by having attorneys from the MBA LRIS answer calls on the air. Several more phone calls and a meeting with the reporter, his producer, the MBA LRIS Committee Chair and Program Director resulted in the creation of the “Lawyer Line.” The program airs periodically, in fact it airs during media ratings periods because it has proven to be so popular.

The program is a win-win situation. MBA LRIS panel members volunteer their time for about 2 hours, from 4:30-6:30 p.m., during the live local newscasts. The MBA LRIS program and the station work out story ideas together, such as the right to cancel a contract, consumer loan scams, and landlord/tenant issues. Volunteer lawyers get our press kit, a copy of the current statute for that evening’s topic, refreshments and a tour of the TV studio. The volunteers report that they have a great time. Most have not spoken to a client without the benefit of a screening by a paralegal or secretary in years and enjoy the contact. The TV station loves to boast that it is providing “free legal advice” to its viewers.

Best of all, they start promoting the “Lawyer Line” and the MBA LRIS the day before our program runs. This is prime time advertising for free. In addition, other reporters have learned that they can call the MBA LRIS any time if they need a live interview with an attorney who practices in the area of law relating to a story on any subject.

Pay attention to your local television programming to pick up ideas that could help promote your LRIS. Another Milwaukee television station runs a continuing series aimed at senior citizens, hosted by a veteran news anchor. Not only was the host and his producer thrilled when the MBA LRIS arranged to have one of its attorneys discuss probate matters in two segments that aired throughout the year, but, now, whenever the host thinks a lawyer’s input may be called for, he reminds viewers that the local bar association LRIS will help them find the right lawyer. More free television advertising, and with a trusted spokesperson.

Patricia E. Raskin is Director, Milwaukee Bar Association Lawyer Referral & Information Service.

Heather Wagner is Special Projects Development and Public Relations Coordinator, Bar Association of San Francisco Lawyer Referral Service.

The National Marketing Project Update (continued from page 11)

that only qualified lawyers are receiving LRIS cases.

The Standing Committee on Lawyer Referral and Information Service has every expectation that the National Marketing Project and particularly the ABA LRIS logo and slogan, “The Right Call for the Right Lawyer,” will prove to be valuable advertising tools for local Lawyer Referral and Information Services and will increase consumer utilization of the LRIS. The Committee looks forward to a time when calling a lawyer referral and information service, no matter where in the country the client resides, will result in referral to a lawyer qualified to handle the client’s legal problem.

The national marketing project certainly will benefit most of those services in a position to deliver on the promise of quality that “ABA Approved” implies. If your LRIS has not yet sought the ABA stamp of approval, obtaining that approval should be a primary goal for the coming year.

Ronald Abernethy is a former member of the ABA Standing Committee on Lawyer Referral and Information Service.
From the Chair...
by Denis J. Murphy
Chair, Standing Committee on Lawyer Referral and Information Service

Competition. Do we support it? For years many statewide LRIS programs have tacitly agreed to refer calls coming in from an area that a local bar association serves to the LRIS program that a local bar association in that area sponsors. Metropolitan regions with potentially competing programs have an "understanding" of sorts as to what territory they will or will not serve.

It is our position that we are in the business of public service. As a business, a well run program must be financially viable, and if it is operating in the black, it must have a goal that somewhere down the road, it will be financially independent.

Do we, however, compete for the business? Are we doing what we can to go after that consumer who has no idea how to find a lawyer for that nagging problem that may require a lawyer’s services? Do we look at the yellow pages and find that one of the reasons we may not be getting a call is because there are SO many lawyers advertising that the first half hour of consultation is free?

If, suddenly, we were the beneficiary of a locally-run news headline coming nationally out of the ABA that touts the value of finding a lawyer through a locally-run bar-sponsored lawyer referral service, could we handle the influx of calls? Indeed, do we even want more calls?

Like it or not, competition is probably on the horizon for your program. In fact, you may be

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Your Bar’s Speakers Bureau

If your bar association has a Speaker’s Bureau, make sure it is educated about the LRIS program. Meet with the Chair and get a commitment that each lawyer speaking on behalf of your bar to community groups will hand out your lawyer referral brochures and mention the service.

Take Advantage of Special Events (or Make One Up)

1996 marked the Bar Association of San Francisco (BASF) LRS’ 50th anniversary. To capitalize on this occasion, the LRS engaged in a number of activities. For example, it held a reception for over 200 people. Attendees included BASF officers and board members, panel members in addition to representatives of the bench and the media.

After some persuading by the LRS, the mayor of San Francisco issued a proclamation in honor of the occasion and in recognition of the public service that the LRS has provided to the Bay Area community over the last 50 years.

Although you may not have an upcoming 50th anniversary, be creative and come up with your own special occasion. Maybe you are adding a new experience panel. Notify your media contacts. Explain how you want them to be one of the first to know about this new and great public service that you are providing.

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Direct Community Outreach
Both the Milwaukee Bar Association (MBA) and the BASF LRIS are launching a series of “Brown Bag Law Lunches.” Lunch-time meetings will be arranged for the employees of medium to large-sized companies interested in having attorneys experienced in a specific field of law discuss such topics as buying or selling a home, income tax planning or current matrimonial laws.

The companies will help promote the seminar, and the employees just gather in a separate room and spend their lunch hour learning about the law and the services that your LRIS offers. The exposure that this kind of meeting can have for your service is terrific.

The New York City Bar’s program schedules the speakers free of charge as a public service and provides each attendee with a “goody” package, an LRIS brochure, a refrigerator magnet with logo and phone number imprinted and even some candy with the LRIS logo on the wrapper.

The MBA LRIS is in the process of creating relationships with several large local employers’ Employee Assistance Programs (EAP). Check to see if there is an association of employee assistance providers in your area that meets regularly and if, like the Milwaukee chapter, it will allow you to make a presentation or provide you with their mailing list so that you can contact their members. You also can contact the human resources department of local businesses directly. Some businesses use outside EAP providers to run their programs and will provide you with their provider’s name. In addition, your local Business Yellow Pages probably lists some EAP providers in your area.

These programs often assist their employees or the employees of their client corporations in finding legal services and in addressing legal issues. Many EAP programs, whether in-house or outside, are seeking ways to provide employees with assistance for legal problems and provide great opportunities for a symbiotic relationship. With a “Brown Bag” lunch series, EAPs offer an LRIS an audience of employed people with legal needs who can afford legal services. LRIS programs offer EAPs the perfect place to send their clients for basic legal information.

Get to know other resources for referrals in your community. The BASF LRIS hosts a brown bag lunch meeting each year where more than 50 representatives of other legal and community agencies have a chance to discuss who’s doing what and how we can all better support each other’s efforts. Of course, such a gathering is a prime opportunity to tell these agencies to send you appropriate referrals.

Internal Marketing
The easiest group to reach is your bar association membership. Do not assume that they know about the LRIS. Keep them up-to-speed through your own newsletter or a column in the bar newsletter. Whenever possible, let all members know how many calls you answer and how many cases you refer in each area of law.

If a lawyer wins a big case, publicize it. Ask him or her to write a letter to you thanking you for the referral and reprint it in the newsletter. Offer to run a photo along with the story. Not surprisingly, focusing your internal marketing on how much money LRIS has generated for participating lawyers works like magic. Highlight dollars as often as possible.

Be present at as many bar events and meetings as you can. Social occasions are the perfect time to get to know your panel members and schmooze other lawyers about joining the LRIS. Panel members are much more apt to volunteer for a speaking engagement or to help you out with a special case when they know you and your staff personally.

The Milwaukee Bar Association has a beautiful exhibit booth that is set up at MBA events.

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to providing a public service, is a great membership benefit of the bar: what other bar membership benefit or activity brings in clients? Your bar should want to help promote your program for that reason alone.

Speaking of registration, the Milwaukee Bar LRIS started a Summer Registration campaign in 1994. Annual registration fees are $100, but from July 1 to December 31, the fee is decreased to $70. Many attorneys like to give the LRIS a try just for 6 months to start, and here in the frozen tundra (that's Packers lingo), many attorneys spend the winter in sunny climates and are only here in the summer, so the timing is perfect for them. Following our lead, the MBA also has initiated a summer "half off" membership drive. The combination of these two discounts makes for a very attractive opportunity for local lawyers.

Making Use of the ABA Resources
If your program is not already qualified to use the ABA's logo and slogan ("The right call for the right lawyer") find out what you need to do to qualify and do it. Then use it in your advertising material whenever possible. The intent is for the "slogo" to be a recognizable "ABA seal of approval" for lawyer referral services across the country.

The ABA also publishes a public relations media guide that you should not be without! The guide is full of helpful ways to approach marketing, publicity and event planning, and it includes sample press releases and advertising campaigns.

WEB Page
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sage with the director of the LRIS program. (My search engine, Netscape accessed through Ohio State University from a remote off-campus location, did not permit me to do that.)

The ABA Seal of Approval
While few services report that their web sites are attracting a considerable amount of business, it is not too soon for your program to try and stay ahead of the curve. Quality to use the ABA logo and then let the world know by creating a consumer-oriented web site.

The ABA listing of lawyer referral and information services now highlights those programs that have qualified to use the logo with the logo symbol beside their listing. Use of the logo in connection with your web page is one of the ways of letting the market know that you run a consumer-oriented public service referral program that will help members of the public make the "Right Call for the Right Lawyer."

Denis J. Murphy is the Chair of the ABA Standing Committee on Lawyer Referral and Information Service.

From the Chair...
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losing out to competition without even knowing it! With the widespread use of the percentage fee arrangement, many referral services are beginning to recognize the economic potential for well run competitive programs. They are taking on the economic challenges of having their voice heard in a diverse market in which a multitude of providers are attempting to reach the consumer who can afford their service. These services recognize the importance of having loyal panel members, good screening techniques and close contacts with agencies in their community that can resolve problems that do not require a lawyer's participation.

These same programs are beginning to question the wisdom of deferring to that neighboring program to which it occasionally makes a referral. Aside from the legal questions that may need to be resolved if such arrangements were to continue, one suspects that in the future those questions will be resolved on an economic basis. Is the arrangement worth continuing? What are the benefits? What is the downside? Does the consumer benefit? Will the consumer benefit in the future?

The times are changing. To survive, referral services will have to change with the times. Staying ahead of the curve may mean maintaining a competitive edge. What do you think? Competition is one of the subjects to be covered during the LRIS workshop on October 16-18 in Orlando. We will let you know what the LRIS community is thinking about this issue. In addition, we are attempting to take a look at the anti-trust implications involved in those cases where an LRIS has agreed not to compete.
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The ABA's National Workshop on Lawyer Referral provides a fabulous opportunity for the exchange of ideas on running LRIS programs of all sizes and budgets. The workshop offers the best training and education that you can get to help you do your job. If your budget does not allow you to attend (and even if it does for that matter), a PAR (Program of Assistance and Review) visit from the ABA's consultants on lawyer referral is extremely helpful.

The Future of LRIS Advertising: The Internet
The ultimate effect of lawyer and law firm Internet advertising on lawyer referral services is unclear. What is clear is that your LRIS should at least be on the Internet as a resource for those seeking legal help on the world wide web. Both the MBA and the BASF have plans for web sites that will feature information on their LRIS programs. The association home page will have a "hot button" that will allow visitors to access information about the LRIS easily. In addition, Milwaukee's web site will have a place for lawyers/bar members to access details on obtaining LRIS registration materials.

If you have your own logo or are using the ABA's logo, your bar should feature it on its home page. Design the logo so that users can just click on that icon and go directly to a billboard ad on your LRIS. In this ad, you essentially want to repeat the information contained in your consumer brochure (i.e., hours of operation, cost of services, types of lawyers available, and most importantly, your phone number).

Internet providers can let you know how many and which users have accessed your information. As a result, the Internet can be a good source of identifying clients. In any event, be sure to update your home page ad constantly to keep consumers interested.

Finally, if you have the resources, you can even ask potential clients or attorney panel members to send e-mail messages identifying their questions or legal problems that the LRIS staff can address.

The authors invite you to contact them if you would like further information about any of these issues. Patricia Raskin, Director, Milwaukee Bar Association Lawyer Referral and Information Services, 414/274-6760; Heather Wagner, Special Projects Development and Public Relations Coordinator, Bar Association of San Francisco, 415/267-0762.

And the Survey Says...

It has been several years since lawyer referral managers have been able to refer to a central source of current information on all aspects of LRIS program operation. That drought of information will soon end, according to Denis Murphy, Chair of the ABA Standing Committee on Lawyer Referral and Information Service, whose committee is preparing to collect information on all aspects of public service lawyer referral programs. "Today's lawyer referral manager is faced with combining public service and profitability in a way they have never before been required to do.

The survey we are conducting will provide them with key information that they can use for decision making in their local programs."

Murphy indicates that the questionnaire is patterned on surveys previously conducted by the ABA, with additional information on emerging issues such as geographic competition, implementation of percentage fees and other revenue sources, and satisfaction with computer management programs. Contributors to the survey also will be able to submit inquiries tailored to their specific needs.

"We intend to make this information as accessible as possible to the lawyer referral manager," says Sheree Swetin, Director of the ABA Lawyer Referral and Information Service Committee. "Managers, without compromising confidentiality, can find out how their programs compare with similar programs across the country. We think this will add an important dimension to how information is communicated."

The Committee plans to distribute the survey in the fall, and publish the results early in 1998. For survey information, contact Jane Nosbisch, Assistant Staff Director, at 312/988-5754, e-mail: jnosbisch@staff.abanet.org