

CHAPTER 17: PUBLIC RELATIONS

Good public relations are the foundation of a successful bar association. The bar's public image determines its success in the community as well as among the members of the bar. The more publicity it receives in its efforts to reach out, the greater credence and acceptability it will have.

Good public relations are also the foundation of a successful bar event. Despite the best-laid plans, an event or project without effective public relations is like the proverbial tree falling in the forest which no one hears—what good is a successful event if no one knows about it?

Good public relations serve not only to publicize events and people, but to put the event in the best possible light. Most young lawyers sections do not have the luxury of their own public relations personnel. Therefore, as chair you should use whatever public relations expertise is already available, most likely from your senior bar. If there is no public relations person on staff accessible to you, the following is a nuts and bolts approach for your young lawyers section.

A. Approaching the Media

1. Who is your Audience?

The first thing you must do in arranging publicity for any events is decide who your audience is and how you want to reach that audience. Secondly, you must determine the type of media to which you wish to direct your efforts. You may decide radio is the way to go or possibly both radio and newspaper. Or you may have a crack at television coverage.

2. Media Contacts

Whichever media form you select, if your young lawyers section is doing its own public relations for the long term, you simply cannot beat good public relations contacts. Knowing where to go to get the press is, in most cases, 90% of the task. And, if you have a personal relationship with a media contact or a way of personalizing your young lawyers section event, the chances of it not only getting press, but getting good press, increase drastically.

Consider appointing a young lawyer media liaison who will handle all media relations. This young lawyer should have the responsibility for developing contacts with the media. He or she will be the person the media will contact for news and he or she will be known as the one in the young lawyers section who disseminates the information.

If your young lawyers section has a significant percentage of public relations-type projects, you might consider proposing a mutually beneficial arrangement with the media. Perhaps your young lawyers section could supply the radio station, TV station, or paper with the lawyer expertise they need for their call-in, talk show or legal column. This type of free public relations is invaluable and helps solidify your media contacts.

B. Publicity for Internal YLS Functions

The third part of good public relations is timing. Don't wait until one week before your event to decide to try to get good public relations. Public relations planning should be a major part of the project's timetable and execution. Find out how far ahead radio, TV, or the press needs to get your public relations information. More events have failed due to lack of or late public relations than any other reason. There is nothing more frustrating or disheartening than having spent weeks or months planning an event, then seeing it fall flat when no one shows because no one knew about it. Don't let it happen to you!

Don't forget to publicize the success of the event after it has already taken place. Even if the media has not publicized an event for you in advance, send them a press release after the event. They may be inclined to cover the next event better. When sending out a press release, make sure that everything important is stated in the first paragraph. Many media organizations will cut off press releases after the first paragraph.

Pitch your publicity for a receptive audience. As a general rule, neither the media nor the public will be interested in self-serving bar issues. Nevertheless, if you are sponsoring a program of particular community interest, such as one on parental or spousal abuse, tie it into the community's needs and present the media with the local angle. Show the media what your group is doing to help the community.

C. Publicity for Internal YLS Functions

Just because you are planning an event solely for young lawyers section members, *i.e.*, an internal function, is no reason to ignore the public relations aspect. In many cases it is all the more reason that your public relations efforts be clear, concise and well-directed. Attorneys are inundated with so many papers, advertisements, fliers and just plain garbage, that you must make your public relations gestures unique, attractive, and effective.

D. Rules of Print

Whether you are preparing a routine bar publication or a topic specific flyer, brochure or invitation to your "big event" of the year, there are four basic rules of print:

1. Design it to Attract

Make it clean and attractive. If it isn't catchy, it doesn't matter what it says, because no one will read it. Clutter will get it nowhere but File 13. Now, if it is your weekly or monthly publication, consistency is key in design. Pick your publication name and your typeface and keep it simple. Then stick to it.

In most cases, you'll do this with your printer's input to be sure you can get what you want. If your publication has photos in it, use candid ones, not posed. Posed photographs look staid, contrived and boring. Action, impromptu shots convey so much more. So long as you are filling the space, make it work for you.

2. Write it to Read Easily

As lawyers, we spend so much of our lives speaking, thinking and talking legalese that it becomes second nature. But if you had your choice of reading a legal brief or an article written in layman's language—easy reading—what would you choose? This even holds true for a professional article. Your readers will be more inclined to complete the article that easily conveys thoughts. If you are publicizing an upcoming event, make it an interesting story, something that will perk your readers' interest. Good writing is the key to keeping your publication from becoming part of the stack that never gets read. And, don't forget to put all of the important points in the first paragraph.

3. Be Sure It Is Credible

While probably more applicable to professional articles than to public relations-type writing, believability is vital. No matter what message you seek to convey, be sure you present all relevant sides—or if not, make it clear that you aren't.

If your bylaws require it, get the permission of the executive council or officers of your affiliate, or even the senior bar, before you publicize topics or events that may be controversial. You may also need to get prior approval before the section takes a public position. In addition, you may want to establish a formal committee that reviews press releases before they are sent to the media.

4. Be Cost Effective

It doesn't do you much good to spend more on publicity than you expect to raise from your project. Be sure your publicity costs are reasonable. Otherwise, no matter how good it is, you won't get a second shot.

These “do's and don'ts” apply to press releases, articles about community events, radio spots, or even publicity to other attorneys in your local bar publications. Think about what makes you notice and remember a particular public relations spot—unique, clear, catchy and timely. Chances are your public relations venture will be a smashing success.