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MANAGEMENT

Making the Most of a Speaking Campaign

A few simple steps will help boost the marketing potential of speaking engagements

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Creating visibility and building credibility are fundamental to the success of all legal marketing campaigns. A well thought out, proactive speaking program directed at appropriately targeted audiences helps achieve this by giving attorneys the opportunity to showcase their expertise. Attorneys will get up close and personal with a room full of prospects, build referral relationships with the event organizers and increase their law firm's visibility. Industry associations, corporations and nonprofit organizations are continually seeking to build their rosters of good speakers.

Whether working with external consultants or on their own, attorneys must avoid shortcuts and take the time to plan and define all their objectives before embarking on a speaking plan. Aside from the obvious goal of bringing in new clients, other objectives are equally important, such as building strategic alliances with trade organizations, increasing newsletter subscriptions, exposing the firm to new prospects and networking with other panelists. Having well-defined objec-

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tives will minimize disappointment and frustration and provide a better gauge for return on investment.

After the speaking engagement, when new clients and referrals don't call, attorneys begin to question the viability of the speaking engagement as an effective marketing tool. What the attorneys fail to understand is that it's not the delivery, style, tone and subject matter of the speech itself that lead to success, but what they do with the business development opportunities before and after the speaking engagement.

Most speaking engagements are booked several months in advance. This time lag allows for ample networking opportunities with other panelists and the host organization. The time lag also provides the perfect opportunity to test your ideas for the presentation itself, with both the organizers and other panelists. The organizers have a vested interest in having a successful program. Their feedback will be invaluable: they will know what the audience will be looking for and can provide guidance as to which direction to take. In addition, they can introduce you to important contacts on different committees and alert you to cross-marketing opportunities, such as writing articles for the organization's newsletter.

At a minimum, the speaker should meet the committee/event organizers at least once. These people are usually working with the same target audience that the law firm seeks to reach. Your cooperation — sending your bio promptly and responding to their requests expeditiously — you will help put your best foot forward. Meeting

with the organizers and coordinators to “break bread” will go a long way in cementing these relationships and alliances. Once the program is over, it's very difficult to network with the organizers, as most have turned their attention to the next event.

Another way to solidify relationships with committee members is to find out how the organization plans to promote the event. Ask them if it's appropriate for you to invite guests and what your firm can do to publicize the program. Inviting your clients and prospects has two advantages: it shows that you are a sought-after speaker and increases attendance. While most host organizations expect speakers to market the event to their target groups, by asking for permission, you are taking a step forward to make working together a positive experience for everyone involved.

Most organizations and trade groups don't like to give attendee lists to speakers before the event. They are afraid of speakers making unsolicited calls. A good way to collect business cards is to offer a white paper or something else of value during your presentation. Ask your listeners to write “yes” on the back of their business card and pass it along; this technique guarantees getting almost all the business cards.

If one of your objectives is to increase the number of prospects, make sure you leave the attendees wanting more. Offer to send them a special report, article or other information that is not in your presentation materials. Not only does this act as a prequalifying mechanism, but it provides the perfect opportunity for you to follow up with them after the day of the presentation.

Having a qualified audience does not lead to or guarantee business immediately. Attorneys must bear in mind that most of the audiences won't be on the same timetable. Most attendees are focused on gaining new insight into a subject matter. In the process, they are getting to know, like and trust you. By taking an educational approach to the presentation rather than a hard-core sales pitch, attorneys are building credibility and increasing their profile.

Audiences often want to keep in touch with speakers but are concerned about the unsolicited approach. The educational approach opens lines of communication between attendee and speaker at a slower, more comfortable and low-pressure pace. Attendees get an opportunity to know, like and trust you, making it more likely that they will subscribe to your newsletter, visit your Web site and give you their business cards.

While presentations may showcase

an attorney's legal expertise, audiences often will not know the differences between a good and an average attorney. However, they will quickly get a sense whether they feel comfortable with you and can do business with you. Thus, it is imperative for attorneys to let their personalities come out in their presentation. A good way to do that is to focus less on the facts and more on storytelling. Being accessible after the presentation will provide opportunities to mix and mingle with attendees on a one-to-one basis.

Getting references and testimonials on the presentation may not be important when you are starting a speaking campaign. However, as the engagements become more prominent, and thus more competitive, testimonials and references can greatly increase your speaking opportunities.

Although often overlooked in this technological age, don't ignore the importance of sending a hand-

written note or thank-you card to committee members. It demonstrates that you took the time and value the relationship with the event organizer/planner. A handwritten note or thank-you card is far more effective than a quick e-mail.

Putting together a good speech takes time and effort. It makes sense, therefore, to integrate the speech into other marketing activities. For example, a speech can be included in a firm's internal newsletter or published under an attorney's byline. It can be distributed to bolster strategic alliances and attract prospects. Also, upcoming speaking engagements can be advertised on the firm's Web site.

By taking advantage of business development opportunities before and after speaking engagements, you can maximize the success of a speaking campaign. ■