



Information for Law Firms On Public Relations



USING PUBLIC RELATIONS TO PROMOTE YOUR FIRM

Public relations is an extremely broad heading and can be used to cover a wide range of activities undertaken by your firm including seminars, parties, sponsorships, or client care initiatives. However, because these are discussed in separate sections of this manual, this section focuses on working and communicating with the public via the media and putting together press releases, articles and radio interviews.

Communicating with your local market place through the media is an important part of any law firm's promotional mix and, though you are not paying for the column inches or radio time, they do have a cost attached, namely the cost of the time put in by members of the firm and any materials, such as stationery, used.

Reasons For Using Public Relations

Depending on the information and messages given out by the firm, public relations can help a legal firm to achieve a whole range of objectives.

Public relations can be used to promote loyalty amongst existing clients by:

- Raising clients' confidence and confirming their decision to use your firm.
- Giving them useful information.
- Keeping clients up-to-date with activities the firm is undertaking.

Public relations can be used to increase work from existing clients by:

- Reminding clients of the firm's services.
- Telling them about new or expanded services.

Public relations can be used to gain new clients through:

- Putting your firm's name in front of a wide local audience.
- Positioning the firm as having expertise in a certain field.
- Giving the firm credibility and/or a place in the locality.

Public relations can be used to achieve a positive image of the firm through:

- Positioning the firm as an authority on a particular area of law.
- Building a proactive reputation for the firm.

Public relations can be used to combat a negative image or bad press by:

- Giving you the opportunity to put the firm's side across and combat bad press.

Important Disclaimer – Please Note

The Law Society does not give any guarantees, undertakings or warranties concerning the accuracy, completeness or up-to-date nature of information within this document. The Law Society also does not take responsibility for any dependence or reliance placed on the use of practitioner support information provided - and cannot accept liability for any loss or damage incurred as a result.

ENSURING YOU COMPLY WITH ADVERTISING REGULATIONS

Any public relations initiatives being contemplated by a solicitor in practice need to be checked against the Solicitors (Advertising) Regulations 2002 and any subsequent practice notes. These rules can be accessed on the Society's website at: <http://www.lawsociety.ie/Solicitors/Regulations/Solicitor-Advertising/>

Regulation 12(a) should be noted in relation to public relations activities. It removes certain forms of communications (those designed primarily to give information on the law) from the definition of advertisement. A book, or unpaid article or interview on a legal topic by a solicitor will not be regarded as an advertisement.

Regulation 11(b) and (c) then provide for specific exceptions to this rule – a book that issues for free or at a reduced cost may be regarded as an advertisement, as may the repeated publication of an article or interview.

Regulation 4 should be carefully read. It prohibits all promoting and advertisements which:

- Are likely to bring the profession into disrepute,
- Are in bad taste,
- Reflect unfavourably on other solicitors,
- Assert that a solicitor has specialist knowledge superior to other solicitors,
- Are false or misleading,
- Are contrary to public policy.

Regulation (4)(a)(viii) bans promoting and advertisements which refer to claims or possible claims for damages for personal injuries, the outcome of such claims or the provision of services by solicitors in conjunction with such claims.

Regulation 4(a)(ix) prohibits promoting and advertisements which “solicit, encourage or offer any inducement” to make such claims.

Regulation 4(b) specifies that advertisements generally shall not include more than:
the solicitor's name, address, telephone and fax numbers, place of business and location of information provided by the solicitor that is accessible electronically; particulars of the solicitor's qualifications and legal expertise; factual information on the legal services and areas of law to which the services relate; particulars of charges; and any other information permitted by Regulation 5 of these regulations.

Regulation 5 contains a list of the “other information” permitted by the regulations, such as hours of business, job descriptions, membership of organisations, reference to other clients (with that client's consent) and other miscellaneous information.

Regulation 9(a) is also especially important to note. It forbids the inclusion of any words or phrases which suggest that legal services relating to contentious business will be provided at no cost or at a reduced cost – such as “no foal no fee”, “most cases settle out of court” or “insurance cover arranged to cover legal costs”.

Regulation 13(a) provides that an unsolicited approach may not be made where it is likely to bring the profession into disrepute. Regulation 13(b) provides that approaches may not be made in inappropriate locations or at, or adjacent to a calamitous event.

USING PRESS RELEASES FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS

Press releases are a recognised method of sending out information to be picked up by local press, specialist magazines and/or local radio and TV stations.

General Guidelines on How to Draft a Press Release

Press releases should be of interest to targeted readers within media and can focus on a topical legal issue, on an activity where the firm is involved within the local area, or in response to a broad national issue or in response to a highlighted problem that is considered important locally.

The following are guidelines on how to draft an effective press statement:

- Press releases should be printed as identifiable press release documents – such as on headed paper with a large heading ‘Press Release’ or ‘News’ statement printed across the top.
- Press releases should be set out in double line spacing.
- They should ideally be no longer than one side of A4 - though detailed matters can run longer if necessary.
- They should include quotes from named and relevant individuals where possible.
- It is critical to include contact details of people who can provide further information and quotes.
- Towards the end of the document, press releases should include background information or sources of further information for reporters.
- The priority in drafting a press release is to produce a document that is newsy, concise and includes all necessary information.

General Guidelines on Making Contact with Media

There are a number of things to be aware of with the press:

- Sending out a press release does not mean that it will be used.
- The press are looking for news and therefore a negative angle might be seen as more newsworthy than a positive one.
- It is important that a press release is checked in its own right for any negative aspects and also checked to ensure it is not contradicting any other press releases sent out or adding fuel to a recent or existing negative story. For example, it would be unwise to send out a press release about expanding your offices just after discussion on solicitors charging high fees has featured in the news.
- Quotes and stories will be edited and changed by reporters to suit the story that they decide to write.
- The reporter is very likely to contact other parties for a quote or comment.
- You need always to be aware of the broad national view of solicitors to ensure that the press release is appropriate.

When working with reporters and journalists, always operate on the basis that nothing is ‘off the record’. Be careful – because bad news is more newsworthy than good news. This is not meant to put anyone off working with the media – but to encourage caution.

WRITING AND SENDING OUT PRESS RELEASES

Usually you will be sending out press releases to the following:

- Local newspapers.
- Local radio stations.
- National press.
- Local magazines such as local authority publications or free sheets.
- Local TV news rooms where they will feature the local news after the main news.
- Trade publications.
- Legal publications.

The main audiences for your regular press release will tend to be your local press, radio stations, magazines or TV news rooms.

However, if your firm becomes the focus of the national press then you will need to deal with the national press and issue them with press releases stating your firm's position, when and if it happens.

If there is an issue of national concern about which you are commenting, you can send the press release to the national press. The important rule to follow when deciding to which media you should send your press release, is that the information involved needs to be of interest to their readers, viewers or listeners.

Creating a Media List

It is recommended that you create a media list of all the media listed above that is relevant to your firm. Once you have established a list of the different media, the next step is to establish the name and/or location of the person in that media who should receive your release.

You can do this by telephoning and asking to whom you should send press releases and whether they would like to receive press releases via e-mail (some will prefer not to), fax or in the post.

At the same time it is a good idea to ask for editorial deadlines. If these are for magazines or trade publications ask about the editorial or forthcoming features schedule to see whether there are areas you can tie in with.

Using this information, you can now create a mailing list. You should then try to update your list on a regular basis. It is helpful to obtain copies of publications or newspapers that you want to target so that you can become familiar with their approach and style. The best way may be to have your firm put on their distribution lists where possible, or telephone them and ask them to send you a media pack or features list.

If your firm is based outside the distribution area of a publication, you can often pay a subscription to have the publications sent to you, or find out if anyone in the firm lives in the distribution area so that they may request to receive those publications. If you advertise with different publications, you will usually be put on a distribution list by the media sales executive.

The Best Time to Send Out a Press Release

There are two types of press releases - planned press releases and reactionary press releases. The latter are sent out in response to something happening.

Planned Press Releases

It is possible to plan press releases for the year in advance. These will tend to be press releases about a planned and diarised event, i.e. a seminar, an office move, the opening of a new department, a change in the legal services the firm offers, an anticipated change in regulations or the law that will affect the public. This can include press releases about specific members of the firm who might be undertaking a personal achievement such as a local marathon run event.

Press releases may be sent out to remind specific groups of people about a requirement at different times in the year, for example, consumer finance at Christmas time because people are spending a lot of money in the shops, or a release about a person's right to compensation if holidays do not meet standards in the summer. The idea behind these releases is to provide a public service.

It is always a good idea to have a public interest hook upon which to hang your press release. To ensure you maintain momentum in sending out press releases, it is a good idea to sit down and pull together a 12 month calendar of planned press releases. For instance, one per month is a good starting point.

Reactionary Press Releases

These will be press releases reacting to:

- Negative press about the firm or any of the fee earners in the firm.
- An economic situation, i.e. a press release about conveyancing if the housing market is very active.
- An unanticipated change in the law or regulations.
- Negative press about solicitors in the area or about solicitors generally.
- A query raised by the press.

Embargo Dates

It can be a good idea to put an embargo date on your press release. This is the earliest date the information can be announced in the press. It could be the date it should arrive or a couple of days ahead. This ensures that any announcements you wish to make will be published at the same time.

Pictures Provided With Press Releases

It is always a good idea to send a picture with the press release, an actual photograph (though this will prove expensive) or a scan of a photograph. If you send a scan, you should include a note below it stating that a photo or high resolution scan is available on request. Always remember to write a caption for photographs.

Drafting a Press Release

Press releases are factual information sheets. They do not need to be journalistic articles in their own right. They should contain all relevant information and put forward the point of view they are meant to convey in concise and clear language.

Recommended Format for Drafting a Press Release

Heading. This needs to give a clear indication of the content of the press release:

'Local solicitors firm to provide revolutionary conveyancing service'

First paragraph/lines. The first paragraph should set out the main facts clearly with any dates or other key information:

'From 1 December 2010, *[name of solicitors' firm]* in *[location]* will be offering clients a new streamlined conveyancing service.'

Second and third paragraphs. This should give some background detail and more information about the new service with any benefits clearly set out.

'The new service will enable clients to purchase conveyancing services at a cut price with increased information and improved client contact' *[Further explanation should follow.]*

Fourth paragraph. This should be a quote:

'Mr. *[name]*, Senior Partner at *[name of firm]*, commented on the new service:
"We have been investigating new ways of offering conveyancing to clients. We had certain criteria we wanted any new service to meet, such as lower fees and greater client contact so that we can give clients more information all the way through the process. The new system means we can do this.'"

Fifth paragraph. This might involve further background information or mention how this service compares to other firm's services or whether it meets any external organisation's requirements.

Sixth paragraph. It would be ideal if this paragraph included a quote from a satisfied customer, an estate agent, etc. to round off the piece.

Editors' notes. These should outline factual details of the firm. For example:
[name of firm] had been established for *[number]* of years.

There are five partners and the firm has 20 staff. The new conveyancing department will have six members of staff. *[name of firm]* offers clients the following legal services:

Private Clients: Litigation
 Wills and Probate
 Conveyancing

Business Clients: All company and commercial work
 Tax Advice
 Commercial Property

At the Bottom of the Press Release. Good contact details should be provided, of at least one person who can provide more information and a further quote if required.

ARTICLES AND RADIO INTERVIEWS

Placing articles in the media and taking part in radio chat shows and interviews as the local legal specialist can be a good way of raising the profile of the firm and those that work for the firm. It is also a good way of building a relationship with the media.

Opening Up Opportunities for Articles and Interviews

Good ways to open up a new opportunity include:

- Write an article about a topical subject and then offer it to appropriate media.
- Contact different publications and discuss possible articles. Ask them what format they would like and how many words. You can then produce an article for them.
- Contact different publications such as local newspapers, and suggest a regular legal advice column to them.
- Contact local radio stations and offer your services, or the services of the members of your firm as legal specialists to answer listeners' phone-in queries.

Producing an Article/Column

The following are points to remember when producing your article:

- Read through the publication you are writing for and try to write in a style that fits and appeals to its readership.
- Articles should be as well written as possible. Depending on the circumstances, it might be worth employing a freelance journalist to edit or even write the article.
- Your article should be clear and concise with the main points explained in easy-to-understand sentences that are free of ambiguity.
- Avoid using legal jargon or long complicated words without an explanation of what they mean.
- If you are given a word count, stick to it.
- Be prepared for your work to be edited, cut down in size and re-hashed as there is a very good chance it will be.
- Be ready with a picture that can be published with the article.

Doing Radio Interviews

If you propose someone for a radio show or interview, make sure they have a clear and pleasant speaking voice, they know their subject area well and that they feel comfortable going on radio.

It is a good idea to stage a mock-up practice. To do this, have someone telephone you on a loudspeaker phone with likely questions about the subject area and tape-record the answers given. It is surprising the number of 'umm', repeats and fades that will be heard and it is good to make an individual aware of them so that they can try to avoid them if possible.

Ideally, if the interview goes well, the person involved, or your firm generally, will be asked back to do subsequent interviews. Therefore, if you would like to increase your firm's radio PR, it may be worth sending key people on a training course.

GENERAL MATTERS REGARDING PUBLIC RELATIONS

Accessing Subjects and Information to Use

If you produce a client newsletter, articles that are included in that could be put forward to the press for publication or picked up by the radio.

It is always a good idea to send out a copy of your client newsletter to the print press and local radio stations when it is produced. If they want to use any story from the newsletter, they will contact you.

If you commission an article to be written for you, you should ensure that you have the appropriate rights/licence to put that article forward. Alternatively, you could change the appropriate rights/licence to put that article forward.

Evaluating Your Press Release Efforts

Before you can evaluate your PR activity, you need to ensure that you are capturing any items published or broadcast about your firm. You therefore need to follow up any press releases you send out by checking the media you sent them to.

It is a good idea to establish a system for this where every week someone goes through relevant press seeking mentions of your firm. This is often a useful exercise for the person in charge of press releases as it will help them to keep up-to-date with what is being published in the paper and identify any opportunities for publicity.

There are a number of matters you should assess to establish how successful your firm has been at PR.

One approach is to count the column inches of coverage that your firm has received in magazines and newspapers, and the air time your firm has been given on the radio and TV - that is the result of press releases you have sent to the media and other PR work.

If you sent out press releases or contacted the media in relation to a negative story, how successful were you in limiting the damage by getting them to put your side across or bringing them round to your side? Maybe you managed to get the media to retract (where they were incorrect) or print your defence which they may do by publishing a letter from you putting your point across.

If you are given negative coverage due to a misunderstanding or misinformation, it is always a good idea to write a letter to the editor explaining the true facts. It is this letter that they will often print; sometimes they will print an apology which is even better.

Look at the balance between negative and positive press and which was dominant. If you received a great deal of negative press you may need to promote your firm positively both through public relations and marketing to regain lost ground and restore confidence in your clients.