

# Is your firm ready for PR?

As a publicist, I often speak with law firms who are interested in implementing a public relations program. Oftentimes, the firm has never done public relations and is not familiar with what such a program entails. They do recognize that public relations has value but are not certain of its role as part of a business development and marketing program.

## What Does PR Do?

Public relations is often confused with marketing, but they are not the same thing. However, the two areas are complementary—it is hard to have one without the other. Public relations is mostly concerned with how a company interacts with its audience and the public in general. While marketing focuses on selling, PR focuses on relationship building. A good PR strategy might involve working on content creation, managing social media accounts, interacting with customers online and offline, and talking to the press.

Public relations can serve as a distinctive tool for building and extending a firm's reputation, practice area differentiation and expert thought leadership. Public relations is all about relationship building, not just with the media but with your target audience. Unlike advertising, public relations (specifically media outreach) is third-party endorsement of your firm and practice. A stranger saying nice things about you is much more powerful than you telling the world how wonderful you are.

## Why Is PR Necessary?

You may believe that since business is good and you have no trouble attracting clients, that PR is unnecessary. However, this good fortune may not last forever. There are many factors that can impact your business negatively such as an economic downturn or new regulations affecting your industry (e.g. tort reform). In the last decade or so, many national law firms have opened up offices in Texas. This has made the legal market extremely competitive in the state, especially in Dallas and Houston. In addition, these national firms are luring talented attorneys away from local firms.

A comprehensive public relations initiative can assist a law firm in maintaining or enhancing their brand, further business development, position specific attorneys as leaders in key practices or industries, and help with recruitment by elevating a firm's profile to attract top legal talent.

Viewing public relations as a key management function of a business or an essential strategy to manage one's individual reputation will help accomplish important goals such as establishing or enhancing awareness among key audiences, increasing news media and social media presence, and maintaining a consistent voice across communication platforms.



**Carlos Arcos**

Senior Vice President  
Public Relations  
713.826.5195  
carcos@jaffepr.com

## What Makes a Good PR Strategy?

A good PR strategy will include a multi-tiered process with different ways to create a conversation. This might include creating thought leadership opportunities to give credibility to attorneys, which means placing bylined articles on subjects attorneys are conversant in. This could also mean creating videos or podcasts on peripheral but relevant subjects to garner attention and conversation around your leadership and firm. A comprehensive PR program works in conjunction with other elements of your overall marketing strategy, which might include social media, events or charity tie-ins. A PR strategy enables you to consider every aspect of communicating a message in the best possible way. It will also help you to maximize the success of your PR efforts and gain the most appropriate media coverage.

It's wrong to believe that PR professionals can make publicity just happen. Public relations requires the client to participate and provide story ideas. For instance, are there new regulations or a court ruling that impacts a specific practice or affects a particular industry? Has the firm recently settled a large case or won a significant court victory? Has a new attorney joined the firm? All of this is news a PR professional can use.

If you plan on hiring a public relations professional or handling your own public relations program, it's important to understand your goals. It's important to always have a goal for your PR activities. By determining your goal you will have a clear purpose for your PR strategy and maximize the success of your PR activities. Is it to increase business? Or maybe to attract the best attorneys.

Make sure you have access to your analytics, such as traffic to your website, which can help measure the impact or ROI of any media outreach or public relations campaigns. Also, **determine if your website is ready for media coverage. It is important to have a news page where you can post media coverage your firm has received as well as announcements about your firm and attorneys. You can also include client alerts and newsletters. View your competitors' websites to determine if yours seems outdated. If your budget doesn't allow for a complete redo then consider a refresh.**

## Should You Hire a PR Professional?

As a CMO, business development manager or office administrator, you already have a lot on your plate and developing and implementing a comprehensive public relations program may not be feasible. Therefore, it may make sense to have a public relations professional available to you, whether you create hire someone to handle internally or retain an external PR firm.

If you are considering an outside PR professional or firm, know that services are typically billed hourly, by a monthly retainer, or project basis. This may not include expenses such as travel, photographers, printing, makeup artist, etc.

Success doesn't happen overnight so it's crucial to commit time to the public relations process. Sometimes it can take at least three to six months for a PR professional to launch a successful campaign and land media coverage. One of the worst

things a firm can do is hire an outside professional or agency for six months and then let them go because they achieved a singular goal or feel the program is not working. You or your public relations firm, with the firm's input, should establish goals. It's important to regularly communicate to determine if the strategy and or tactics are working. If not, what can be done to improve. The long-term effects of media visibility grow over time, in fact, years, and this creates amplification.

Bill Gates once said, "If I was down to my last dollar, I would spend it on public relations."

If PR is not a part of your marketing program it may be time to consider and implement a public relations strategy to complement your existing marketing plan.

*This article originally appeared in the ALM publication Marketing the Law Firm in the May 2018 issue.*