

Providing what reporters want

By Clifton Barnes

Bar communicators wear a lot of different hats and one of them is being a conduit between the media and the legal profession. But what do reporters want and how can the bar provide them with what they need?

A panel of bar communicators, most of them former journalists themselves, spoke on the topic at a National Association of Bar Executives communications program moderated by Dan Cirucci, associate executive director for communications and public affairs at the Pennsylvania Bar Association.

“We live in media-saturated age where everything seems to come back to the law,” Cirucci said. “Almost every major story we read about deals with law in some way.”

Bill Weber, a 25-year veteran journalist and now director of marketing and communications for the Massachusetts Bar Association, said the main things communicators and bar leaders can do are be honest and respond quickly.

“They’re looking at a deadline and focusing on an individual story that will satisfy their editor,” he said. “The more you can help them get their job done, the better off you’ll be.”

It’s best if bar communicators and bar leaders who work closely with the media can anticipate what journalists will want by keeping up with legal issues.

“I’m a stickler for knowing who I’m talking to,” said Francine Walker, director of public information and bar services for the Florida Bar. “I keep a database on reporters.”

When a reporter calls, she can instantly call up information on her computer that tells her whether or not the reporter has attended their media conferences, what areas that reporter covers on a regular basis and what the reporter has written about the bar and the legal profession.

Cirucci said he reads the newspapers and watches TV everyday. When a

reporter calls, Cirucci said he alludes specifically to an article written or story broadcast by that reporter. "It makes a difference," he said. "It makes it hard for the reporter to continue to be cynical to you when you do things like that."

Matthew Silverman, director of communications of the State Bar of Arizona and a former television news executive, said he has a file on each reporter that includes spouses' names, children's names, where the reporter went to college and other interesting tidbits.

"It's kind of a sales thing," he said, "You're building a relationship."

Silverman said he tries to work his background in the media into the conversation to build a rapport and to basically say to the reporter, "I used to do what you do and I know what you need."

Of course then you have to back it up, he said. "Our job is to help them do their jobs better," Silverman said. "In order to do that, you have to have relationships built on trust." In part, that means getting accurate information to the reporter in a timely manner.

In order to do that, communicators need to have databases of experts on a wide range of topics, said Deborah Weixl, director of strategic communication and planning for the ABA Division for Media Relations and Communication Services.

Weixl said the ABA expects, and prepares for, inquiries about the hot issues of the day such as terrorism, legal assistance for military personnel, diversity, healthcare, privacy and any issues coming from the White House. Materials and experts are lined up to respond.

"We have to educate ourselves about what sections are doing, and anticipate what reporters will want," she said. "Unfortunately, sometimes we (communicators) are the last to know."

Walker said the Florida bar uses an online "tip sheet" to encourage members and bar leaders to tell the bar what's happening in their geographic area and in their area of law. It's part of the bar's "Dignity in Law Program" which looks to tell the "whole story" about what lawyers and judges are doing to help Floridians.

Web sites are also emerging as a key way to make contact directly with the media, Weixl said. "It's a great way to reach out," she said. The extensive use of the Internet, coupled with the fact that reporters today are constantly changing beats or have no particular beat, has changed the way the ABA provides information.

Silverman agreed that the bar doesn't always have a chance to build a relationship with busy journalists so online media resource guides are becoming indispensable.

After putting together online information for reporters, Silverman went directly to reporters and asked them what they thought of it. "They helped us enhance it," he said. Still, he doesn't put all the resources a journalist might need online. "If the reporter doesn't know me as a resource, I want to establish my credibility," he said. "I want them to come through me."

For that reason, and because bar leaders change at least yearly, Silverman said he doesn't put a lawyer/topic contact list for journalists on the Web site.

Weber said he doesn't even include that information in media packets anymore because leaders from three years earlier get phone calls from the media. Panelists agreed that if you give names in advance to the media, you better keep it up to date and send out the new information explaining that the previous information is outdated.

Cirucci said he tries to be onsite in case the media calls but he is always available by cell phone... and he makes sure reporters have that number. If he somehow misses the call, he calls back even if he doesn't have an answer for the reporter yet.

"Be willing to help a reporter with any type of question or story and don't necessarily look for anything in return for your help," he said. "Just be useful. This is the way to build rewarding relationships."

Cirucci said he knows he's built a relationship when the reporter calls just to ask if anything is happening. He added that it's important to always have an answer for a reporter looking for a story idea.

Silverman said that whenever a reporter calls he tries to plant a seed for a story idea at the end of the conversation. “Their bosses want articles so if you plant that seed it can make them look good,” he said. “But you’ve got to know what to pitch and that comes with time.”

Weixl said that not everything needs to be a news release, and that many times the media doesn’t want a news release. She said you should gauge what the public is interested in and focus on that. You’re much more likely to get interest from the media.

Cirucci said to keep up with anniversaries of events and find ways to bring them to life and make them relevant to today. For instance, the 50th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education decision is May 17, 2004. This is the type of “hook” it takes to catch the media’s attention.

At a roundtable discussion after the session, communicators acknowledged that they need help from bar leaders in dealing with the media but that oftentimes lawyers think “everything is newsworthy.”

Silverman, leading the roundtable, said that one of the jobs of a communicator is to constantly educate internally so that leaders understand how the media works, how bar communicators work and how everyone, including bar leaders, can work together effectively.