

Enhancing Public Perception Takes More Than A Makeover

By Clifton Barnes

Bar communicators say enhancing the public perception of lawyers will take more than a makeover but less than a facelift of the legal profession.

Speaking at the National Association of Bar Executives Communications meeting in St. Louis, panelists agreed that the image issue remains foremost on the minds of communicators even without bar leaders reminding them. Everyone seems to agree that it will take more than “good spin.” So, what can be done about it?

“We have a retreat every year and every year they say we’ve got to improve the image of lawyers,” said Kevin Ryan, director of programs and publications of the Vermont Bar Association. “I say that the bad image is, in great part, due to public ignorance of the law. The public is susceptible to negative images of lawyers because they don’t understand law and the legal system.”

Ryan said the public has become cynical about images portrayed to them from public relations efforts. Therefore, his bar made a conscious decision that rather than play with images, they’d focus their attention on education.

Two years ago the Vermont Bar developed a Center for Public Education which doesn’t so much teach people about lawyers as it teaches people about the legal system. “In the process, they see what lawyers do,” he said adding that a more positive image of lawyers will eventually take root.

“Public education is very much at the heart of what we do,” Ryan said. “We spend a good deal of time on it every day.”

Vermont has developed a number of public education programs in addition to the standard Law Day and class room visit programs, and their state’s first statewide mock trial program. They have developed a publication for high school students who are about to turn 18 and have instituted a teacher’s conference for English and Social Studies teachers.

Public forums on specific topics at public libraries have proven to be popular. They have also put their efforts into issues that are of great interest to the public right now including controlling their financial future and making health care decisions.

Vermont also has its own TV program where law-related personalities are interviewed. “This show does not pat lawyers on the back,” Ryan said. “It’s almost an anti-public relations program.” The emphasis is kept on helping the public and helping educate the public about law and the legal system.

Ken Brown, director of public and media relations for the Ohio State Bar Association, agrees that PR doesn’t work with adults who have long-established attitudes and he

focuses on young people.

“We have to build relationships and partnerships to help portray better images of lawyers for young people,” he said.

For instance, the state bar is partnering with local bars to get their “Now You’re 18” pamphlet into schools and to get judges and lawyers as speakers throughout the state.

In addition, they look for opportunities, such as the bicentennial of Ohio, to implement one-time public education projects. In that instance they developed and distributed scripts on the topic to judges, lawyers and state and local bar association representatives to present at schools. They also had students present projects to judges and local lawyers. The entire program was coordinated and accomplished in just six weeks.

They got the word out through traditional news releases. “While there are some things we can do ourselves, the media remains an important vehicle for us,” Brown said.

Brown hasn’t given up on all adults. The OSBA has weekly TV news segments, usually three minutes each, airing in six of the state’s seven major media markets. The bar provides the topics, the lawyers and the questions and answers. There are no out of pocket costs. “With adults, you don’t try to change what they think but what they know,” he said.

The TV programs are coordinated with local lawyers, many of whom are clamoring to get on the program. The Ohio State Bar Association is currently getting the same program started for radio stations throughout the state. Brown said it’s a good public education opportunity, gives good exposure for attorneys and creates a partnership with the media.

“As a result, other people are saying good things about the legal system,” Brown said, adding that it’s much more effective when coming from someone outside the legal system.

The OSBA also has a yearly Law & Media Conference that brings the journalists in, as do briefings held for state legislative reporters.

Mary Ann Wymore, a St. Louis lawyer and former journalist, said that bar leaders need media training to help enhance the public’s impression of lawyers. “Some lawyers have such a fear of talking to reporters that they don’t talk and that comes off as arrogant or that they are hiding something,” she said.

Lawyers have to be willing to be available at the spur of the moment for the media and communicators need to find the appropriate expert commentators for the media. “If lawyers are accessible and can explain things in a way they can be understood, that goes a long way to enhancing the public perception,” she said.

Wymore said that lawyers can't be blind to issues that are causing the bad images of lawyers, such as not returning phone calls to clients in a timely fashion. "Even if the return phone call or e-mail is to say nothing is new, lawyers should do that," she said.

As for measuring the success of all these efforts, panelists agreed that it's mostly anecdotal. "We don't have the money to do the research," Brown said. "We ask our members what they hear."

Bars can chart the calls they get from the media and the public as a result of various projects, and they can ask informal survey questions. While most efforts can be done inexpensively, bars will have to spend some money on public enhancement, and, unless they want to spend a lot of money on research, anecdotal measurement will have to do.

These communications professionals are confident that it's working but it will take a coordinated, concerted and ongoing effort among bars, through partnerships, and between lawyers and bar communicators to make a long-term difference in the public perception of lawyers.