

# Creating Powerful Credentialing Activities Through Proactive PR



By John D. Tuerck

Public relations professionals working with law firms have long struggled to quantify the benefits of securing media mentions for their clients. A new study by BTI Consulting Group, however, helps PR pros make the case.

“Credentialing’ activities are second only to peer referrals and scheduled in-person meetings in their effectiveness in moving lawyers into the hiring zone, and are nearly twice as effective as advertising,” say the authors of “The Attorney Hiring Zone: Top Activities to Win New Clients,” a BTI study commissioned by Hellerman Baretz Communications. “Corporate counsel find an attorney’s participation in these credentialing activities...as credible indicators of an attorney’s potential to be a valuable advisor.” Significantly, the study defines “credentialing activities” to include media quotes and attorney-authored articles in trade publications.

So how can PR professionals help the lawyers in their firms participate in credentialing activities? There are several options. They can promote their partners’ cases and deals, but newsworthy work tends to happen infrequently. They can wait for reporters to call, but that’s not a viable strategy. Or they can wait for the next crisis, but that’s not the type of credential that leaves a favorable impression with would-be clients.

Alternatively, PR professionals can take the initiative and secure media mentions for lawyers by taking the lead in writing the next story. Generating fresh coverage of new legal issues allows the lawyers to showcase their expertise in emerging developments, and it creates the impression that they are paying attention to matters affecting existing and prospective clients. That’s a credential any attorney would like. Additionally, it cements the value of the PR professionals’ services with *their* clients, the lawyers.



With this approach, creative and opportunistic PR professionals take an active role in helping reporters write the next story—and secure a valuable credential for their lawyers in the process.



## Think Like a Reporter

PR professionals who take a proactive approach to public relations—as opposed to waiting for the phone to ring or the next favorable jury verdict—know that reporters are always looking for the next story. They recognize the internal dynamic at publications, where reporters are under constant pressure from their editors to develop fresh ideas. And they recognize the external dynamic of the intense competition between publications, which are always looking to beat the other guy to the next story. The external competition extends from top to bottom; writers at Bloomberg, for example, have incentives built into their compensation that reward them for breaking a story before, say, Reuters.

To capitalize on these dynamics, it pays to think like a reporter. Has your IP group detected an emerging trend in larger awards of lawyers' fees in patent-infringement cases? What's the buzz among your white-collar team regarding new SEC enforcement initiatives? How would a health-reform package affect the benefits plans of your firm's larger clients? Is the uptick in Silicon Valley IPO activity a favorable sign of a more robust economy?

The unwritten story will capture a reporter's attention. Several months ago, an antitrust partner at Ropes & Gray spotted an intriguing section in the U.S. Supreme Court's May 2009 ruling in *Iqbal v. Ashcroft*, in which the justices said that a Pakistani Muslim arrested after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, could not sue former Attorney General John Ashcroft. The partner, Jane Willis, noticed that the justices also extended the application of heightened pleading standards from a 2007 antitrust case to a variety of other cases filed in federal court. *Iqbal*, a case nominally focusing on the rights of enemy detainees, turned out to have an unanticipated impact on a substantial portion of litigation matters handled by large law firms.

Willis shared her observation with the firm's PR team, which immediately started contacting legal reporters. Willis promptly gave several interviews and landed mentions in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The National Law Journal*, Law.com and CNNMoney.com, among other outlets. The resulting credential was a feather in the cap for Willis and the firm's antitrust group, which is keenly interested in establishing a name for itself in a competitive market.

(And as it turns out, Willis had hit the nail on the head: *The New York Times*, in a July 2009 look back at the high court's rulings, described *Iqbal* as “[t]he most consequential decision of the Supreme Court's last term” for the very argument she had outlined.)

## Find the Legal Hook

As is the case with insightful observations, trends are always a fertile source of story ideas for reporters. Norm Beamer, an IP litigation partner in the Silicon Valley office of Ropes & Gray, had noticed that patent litigation appeared to be on the increase in Delaware, hardly a hotbed of IP cases. Beamer set out to study patent litigation and found that, sure enough, patent-infringement filings had increased dramatically in Delaware.

The firm's PR team arranged a discussion with a reporter at *IP Law360*, an online publication that enjoys substantial penetration with lawyers and in-house counsel. The resulting article, published in May 2009, was based entirely on Beamer's findings and cited his analysis throughout. Additionally, the PR team succeeded in placing an article written by Beamer in *The Recorder*, the American Lawyer Media publication that covers California. In addition to serving as a terrific credentialing activity, the placements neatly advanced the firm's strategic goals of attaining visibility for its Silicon Valley office and its acclaimed IP litigation practice.

Another way to capture a reporter's interest is to find the legal hook in an ongoing phenomenon. The emerging “green tech” industry, for example, is the subject of continuous coverage in the media. Last year, a San Francisco litigation partner at Ropes & Gray, Thad Davis, observed that nearly \$60 billion in federal stimulus funds aimed at spurring “clean energy investments” came with strings attached, including the potential application of the federal False Claims Act. The observation trained a legal lens on a story that was previously of general interest.

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The firm's PR team initially called two Bay Area trade publications, which expressed interest but eventually declined to write on the topic. The team then contacted *Law Technology News*, another American Lawyer Media publication, and proposed that Davis write an article for publication. The editor accepted the pitch, and Davis's article, “Green Law: Strings Attached,” was published in August 2009 and republished at Law.com. The article showcased Davis's expertise in white-collar crime and positioned the firm as a leader in legal issues affecting emerging technologies.

Credentialing activities, as the authors of the BTI study make clear, are an effective means of positioning lawyers to win new business. Engaging in passive PR by waiting for the phone to ring or for the next big buyout is one way to participate in such activities. A more effective strategy, however, is proactive PR. With this approach, creative and opportunistic PR professionals take an active role in helping reporters write the next story—and secure a valuable credential for their lawyers in the process. ■

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*John D. Tuerck, a former journalist and non-practicing lawyer, was the communications director at Ropes & Gray and is now a consultant. He can be reached at jtuerck@gmail.com or 781/801-7381.*