



Communicating with YOUR Community

Local Bar Associations – Making an Impact

Good communications strategy is determined by the needs of both the entity/individual communicating and the audience. Public and media communications approaches should be adopted depending on the circumstances of the program or opportunity.

Local bar associations are well positioned to influence and educate the public because their members are generally active and known within community circles outside of a primarily legal context. Local bar associations can also play an important role in establishing educational programming to reinforce professionalism and ethical behavior of those who practice law in their communities.

One of the challenges of a public image/education campaign is determining expectations and assessing how the outcome of the effort will be measured. Some questions to consider:

- What would you like to change about the way the profession is perceived?
- What image or reputation would you like to put forth?
- What evidence would indicate that you have succeeded? (Realistic expectations must be clearly defined.)

An effective program to influence public perception must focus on public education about the law. A key component is to convey to lawyers that they share responsibility for and must make a commitment to improving the public perception of the legal profession.

Key Messages In a Public Education Campaign

Messages must be consistent and be repeated to achieve measurable impact:

- Serving members and the public.
- Working to ensure access to justice for all citizens.
- Helping lawyers provide the highest quality legal services to better serve their clients and the public.

- Safeguarding the public and fostering high standards of ethical conduct.
- Educating the public about the justice system.
- Promoting and encouraging community and pro bono service.
- Advocating for those who otherwise would not have a voice.

Message Development

Effective messages help you tell your story and provide basic structure to:

- Organize the information you want to convey
- Categorize it in meaningful terms for your audience
- Communicate it clearly, concisely, and consistently

A “triangle” strategy is an easy way to put a message together. Develop three messages that express the essence of what you want to get across and what you want your audience to remember. People remember things in sets of three so if you develop three key messages and then back them up with examples or proof, you can easily stay on message. Each of the messages should stand on its own but should also complement at least one of the other two messages in the triangle.

Tips on developing your message:

- Identify the issues you are addressing and list the ways you are solving the problem or actions you are taking.
- Define your goals and list the actions you will take to achieve those goals.
- What message are you trying to get across? Why do your goals matter to your audience? What differentiates your organization/message from others?

Characteristics of great messages:

- *Short and simple* — Use short phrases and understandable words. Avoid long, complex sentences or legal jargon. Be direct.

- *Understandable* — Messages need to matter to your audience. If the issue does not matter to them, they will not pay attention. Your message should tell your audience why it is important to them and/or what service you are going to provide that will be important to them.
- *Credible* — Good messages need to be believable and appropriate to the messenger.
- *Compelling* — Great messages grab your audience's attention and interest. They are memorable. You want your audience to tell others what they heard or read and/or remember your program/activity when they need it. Motivate your audience to action.
- *Carefully developed* — Be sure you have thought about your message before you talk to the media, write a press release, or communicate with your members.

Why is an effective communications program essential?

- To increase awareness of an organization's mission.
- To identify and convey key messages to the audiences it is accountable to and serves.
- To assist in achieving strategic objectives.

What can lawyers do to influence public perception?

- Take personal responsibility for professionalism and high ethical standards.
- Educate the public through participation in local bar, State Bar, and TYLA programs.
- Identify and promote improvements to the justice system.
- Improve communication with clients and other legal professionals.
- Be prepared to debate facts.
- Be proactive in correcting common myths about lawyers and judges, and communicating with others the role of lawyers in our society.
- Participate in pro bono activities and support access to justice initiatives.
- Serve the community and the profession by volunteering.
- Reach media and civic group leaders with positive messages about the role of lawyers and how the system of justice works.

What can local bar associations do?

Educate consumers about handling common legal problems

- Create or enhance programs that provide students and consumers information about how to handle common legal problems.
- Educate consumers about the questions they need to ask and what to look for when hiring a lawyer.
- Support and promote state or local lawyer referral services.

Educate lawyers about maintaining good client relationships

- Clearly communicate what clients can expect. Be up-front about fees. Return phone calls promptly. Explain timelines. Don't over-promise. These are the areas consumers most often cite as cause for dissatisfaction with lawyers.

Encourage public service activities by lawyers

- Encourage pro bono work by lawyers.
- Promote public service and community outreach by lawyers and judges.

Public outreach

- Focus on the positive things that lawyers do. Consumers appreciate lawyers for their knowledge of the law and for their advocacy on behalf of their clients. Any campaign should emphasize that lawyers are experts and advocates.
- Create materials and programs to help the news media understand the legal system and judicial process. Partner with media organizations to provide such services.

For more information or assistance, contact the State Bar of Texas:

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