

Public Relations Plays a Necessary Role in the Courtroom

By Amy Zucker, President of Synergy Marketing Group, Inc.

While a fair trial in terms of “justice served” rests in the hands of judge and jury, the court of public opinion is an entirely different matter. And for some business leaders, the perception of their character or the viability of their organization may be as important in the long term as the final court decision.

There is no doubt that we live in an era in which each word we utter or any nuance alluded to by either party in a law suit has the potential to resoundingly echo to millions via YouTube, Facebook and Twitter ... not to mention 24-hour news stations, talk radio and traditional media. And these reports can both damage beyond repair or elevate perception above comprehension. Thus, the need for public relations and message management, in consort with litigation, has become increasingly important.

By integrating legal counsel and public relations strategy, you will educate the jury pool while minimizing damage that could occur to your reputation and business in both the short- and long-term – regardless of the outcome of the case. Proactively retaining a public relations professional in the early stages of litigation can help control messaging, strategically time the distribution of information, influence the slant of press coverage and sway public opinion.

An experienced PR practitioner can systematically help you accomplish each of these tactics in tandem with your legal counsel to ensure the best possible outcome for your case and your image:

- 1) Identify and prioritize key audiences that will become aware of or involved in the suit. Even a personal legal matter can negatively impact your professional reputation or business interests if the media sensationalizes the case. Stakeholders may include shareholders, investors, employees, suppliers and

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customers. Also, determine how and when to communicate with these constituents throughout the litigation process.

- 2) Appoint a single spokesperson (whether it is you, your lawyer or PR professional) that will field all media inquiries. This person must be poised, prepared and empowered to deliver approved messaging.
- 3) Craft position statements in advance of filing any documents with the court or initiating any legal action that could become public. This will enable you to quickly and professionally respond to questions from the media or other stakeholders.
- 4) If legally advisable, be responsive to inquiries about the case – use the pre-prepared, pre-approved position statements to control messaging. “No comment” is often synonymous with “I’m guilty.” In the media, perception is reality.
- 5) Be positive and project an aura of optimism and confidence when talking to the media. Stick to the pre-prepared talking points to reinforce your position, but do not attack the other side. This will only fuel a reporter’s tendency to sensationalize the story and cover the parties’ emotions rather than the facts.
- 6) Capitalize on the power of the Internet and use it to your advantage. Post position statements on your Web site if appropriate or e-mail the statements to critical stakeholders in advance of press coverage. This will keep target audiences in-the-know and aware of your position on the case – despite how the media may report on events.
- 7) Treat the media with the same respect you expect them to extend to you. Return calls promptly and politely, and act as cooperatively and professionally as possible. Stay calm and professional even when reporters bait you with negative allegations from the other side. Stick to the pre-prepared talking points.

These are just a few strategies to review with your attorney and public relations professional. There are many other ways to control messaging and influence public opinion. As in the courtroom, there are many potential landmines when dealing with the media. Retain a PR expert to help you navigate these uncharted waters to yield short-term (the case outcome) and long-term results (your reputation).

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About the Author:

Amy Zucker, a public relations and marketing veteran with 15 years of industry expertise, is president and founder of Synergy Marketing Group. The firm is a Woman-owned Business Enterprise (WBE) with offices in Indianapolis and Dallas. In addition to public relations, the agency also specializes in brand development, strategic marketing, advertising, Web site development, social media and event planning. In her role as president, Amy sets the agency's quality standards, defines Synergy's client service model and develops the firm's operational processes. She also actively participates in all clients' strategic planning processes and provides them with ongoing counsel and crisis management. Throughout her career she has helped her clients increase brand awareness, establish credibility, generate demand, launch new companies, and measure return on investment. Her areas of expertise include: strategic planning; crisis management; corporate communications; brand creation; crafting and effectively delivering strategic key messages; and garnering prominent press coverage in local, regional, national and trade media outlets. Amy can be reached at 317.205.9690 ext. 223 or amy@synergy-mg.com. To learn more about Synergy Marketing Group, please visit www.synergy-mg.com.

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