

# Is 'Humble' in Your Marketing Repertoire?

Steve Matthews | July 2011

Occasionally, we hear about celebrities or athletes whose oversized egos tripped them up in public, and we blame their downfall on "reading their own press clippings." A similar danger lurks for lawyers who are simply trying to promote themselves online.

When it comes to marketing, lawyers are commonly encouraged to focus on the concept of expertise. Specifically, they're advised to become the "go-to expert" in their chosen field, or even to become (a term I've used myself in the past) a "thought leader." [<http://www.slaw.ca/2007/10/14/thought-leadership-a-long-term-investment/>] It's a fine idea, but there's a problem: some lawyers have taken this advice literally and filled their marketing materials with those exact terms and phrases.

"John Smith is the nation's foremost expert on intellectual property," their websites proclaim. Or, "Cindy Johnson is widely considered a thought leader in the area of medical malpractice claims." Quite often, the reader's instant reaction to these declarations is: "According to whom, precisely? Who decided you were a thought leader? Please tell me you didn't create that title yourself."

And here's the rub. This is one of those unwritten rules that appears to require writing out from time to time: expert status should almost always be bestowed by others, not claimed by you. This is especially true of the word "expert," a dangerous term that in some jurisdictions is forbidden unless the specific title of "expert" has been granted by a lawyers' governing body.

Given that most lawyers are able to write around such a term and its ethical considerations, the better question is probably: when exactly is it acceptable to toot your own horn? My suggestion is that you can get away with asserting "expert" status only if you can back it up immediately after making the claim. Two acceptable examples would be the commercial messages delivered on your website's practice pages and lawyer profile pages. You can also conceivably use it in the biography at the end of an authored article (because you've just demonstrated it in the preceding content), but the list of acceptable placements drops dramatically from there.

Consider just some of the ways and locations where lawyers oversell themselves as self-anointed gurus:

- **Social media:** We've all read Twitter profiles whose owners refer to themselves as (pick one or more) a "guru," "thought leader," "expert," "foremost authority on \_\_," "leading authority on \_\_," and so forth. The response to all these claims is the same: "Says who?"

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- **Blog posts:** Unlike a published article, blog posts are supposed to be about connecting with your readership. Yet some lawyers end every blog post with a self-congratulatory promotional message. Blasting the same advertisement over and over again achieves the opposite end to what was intended. With all the self-promotional aspects of blogging, not to mention the marketing opportunities within a blog's web design, it's hard to imagine why the message must be compromised.
- **Speaking engagements:** It's one thing to introduce yourself to the audience and establish your credentials; it's another to bill yourself as the greatest thing since sliced bread. An aggressive sales shtick in your opening could well lose your audience before you begin.
- **Email signatures:** Appending your name, title and web locations to the end of your messages makes great marketing sense. But there's a tipping point, right? If your email signature is three times the size of everyone else's, it might be time to pare back that list of lifetime accomplishments.

Difficult as it is for some to believe, humility counts towards likeability; not only that, but interestingly enough, it also makes for a more believable expert. "Under-promise and over-deliver" is also a marketing mainstay that applies: let your clients decide that you're an expert based upon your performance. Not only is this message better delivered by the hand of others, but it will support such claims of status when you do make them.

After all, it was Dizzy Dean, a baseball pitcher not short on confidence, who famously said: "If you can do it, it ain't braggin'."

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