

**Forget about love and hate:
Strive for “professional”
In your relationship with reporters**

Janet Ellen Raasch

Janet Ellen Raasch is a writer, ghostwriter and blogger (www.constantcontentblog.com) who works closely with professional services providers – especially lawyers, law firms, legal consultants and legal professionals – to help them achieve name recognition and new business through publication of keyword-rich content for the Internet as well as articles and books for print. She can be reached at (303) 399-5041 or jeraasch@msn.com.

Lawyers and law firms often maintain a love-hate relationship with reporters. When they have good news to tell about themselves or their clients, they actively seek media attention. When the news is not so good, they try to duck around the corner.

Pestering a reporter at some times and avoiding the same reporter at other times gives a mixed message and can lead to a not-very-productive relationship. A reporter’s job is neither to help lawyers and their clients nor to hurt them. It is to provide readers with the objective information they need to know in order to make good decisions about their personal and business lives.

Most reporters understand and respect the professional constraints placed on lawyers – especially when it comes to client confidentiality – as long as this need does not unreasonably conflict with their need to report the news. Lawyers would do well to treat reporters with equal respect. A balanced, professional approach works much better -- for both parties -- than a love-hate relationship.

A panel of reporters and editors for daily, weekly and monthly publications discussed the reporter’s perspective before members and guests of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association (www.legalmarketing.org/rockymountain). The presentation was held March 10 at The Denver Press Club.

Participants included Greg Griffin, reporter at *The Denver Post*; Cara DeGette, managing editor of *Law Week Colorado*; Renee McGaw, reporter at *The Denver Business Journal*; and Mike Cote, editor of *ColoradoBiz* magazine. Moderator was Lisa Simon, chief marketing officer for law firm Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck.

A reporter’s perspective

Before pitching a story idea to the press, carefully review the publication to see which kinds of articles it runs and to determine which reporter covers the appropriate “beat.”

All of the panelists said that they prefer to be contacted by email or by phone – not mail. A “blanket” press release that has obviously been sent to many publications will get less attention than an email or phone call offering an exclusive.

The definition of “news” in the eyes of a reporter or editor can vary with how often a publication appears, although there is some overlap. A daily publication wants to be the first to cover news as it happens (although all publications relish the opportunity to break important stories). To appeal to a daily, you must be timely with your news and provide the name of a lawyer who is ready and able to talk.

“As a weekly, we have the luxury of having more time to interpret the news,” said DeGette. “Because of *Law Week’s* unique focus on the legal industry, we often can include stories that would not qualify as news for a reader of *The Denver Post*. If a story has already run in the daily newspaper, we will be looking for a fresh angle on that story.”

A monthly magazine is rarely interested in news that broke weeks ago. “Rather, we are interested in trend ideas that lead to lengthy analytical articles – usually around 3,000 words in length,” said Cote. “Recently, for example, we ran a piece comparing jobs in the ‘new energy’ economy with those in the traditional energy economy.”

A daily newspaper, for example, might run the news that a new law has been adopted at the state or federal level. A weekly (or the Sunday section of a daily) would be more likely to consider and write about the impact of that law on local law firms (*Law Week*) and businesses (*The Denver Business Journal*). A monthly might write about the lengthy lobbying effort that contributed to passage of the law.

Each reporter and editor indicated an interest in ideas that provide a local or regional perspective on a legal trend or a national or international business story. Weeklies provide editorial calendars, and are particularly receptive to stories that fit within their calendared themes. None wants to dedicate much time or energy to news that has appeared in a similar form in a competing publication.

News about routine events like the hiring of new attorneys, the promotion of existing attorneys, an expansion into new space, or the announcement of various awards and appointments is welcome, but likely to end up as a short mention in a “people on the move” or “business changes” column rather than a stand-alone article.

All about deadlines

Receptiveness to a story idea has a lot to do with a publication’s deadlines. At the daily paper, reporters prefer to have a story no later than 3 p.m. – but can extend that deadline to as late as 10 p.m. for important breaking news. The Sunday business section, which includes more interpretive content, is printed on Friday night. “If I am going to put the time into a feature article,” said Griffin, “I’ll want it to be an exclusive.”

Law Week goes to press on Monday and *The Denver Business Journal* on Wednesday. “We are always frantic, so these are the absolute worst days for trying to ‘pitch’ a story idea,” said McGaw. “You might get an abrupt reception on an idea that I might find quite appealing just one day later, when I need to provide my editor with three good ideas for article for the next issue.”

ColoradoBiz magazine goes to the printer mid-month and generally assigns articles to its freelance reporters two months or more in advance of publication.

All of the publications maintain online as well as print versions – where an article (like a late-breaking jury verdict in a newsworthy case) can be posted immediately without regard for print deadline, often appearing later in the print version as well.

Terms of use

The “hate” side of the love-hate relationship comes into play when a reporter initiates contact for a story that the law firm did not initiate – and perhaps does not want. If you want a reporter to answer your email or phone call when you are pitching news, you need to respond with equal interest when the reporter is seeking news.

Promptly return the email or phone call to find out what the reporter wants. Ask about deadline. Ideally, you have anticipated the call and are ready with an approved statement and spokesperson. If not, promise to call back (well before deadline) after you have done some research.

If the reporter’s query involves the business operations of the law firm, be as forthright as you can. Never say “no comment” – which is almost always perceived by reporters and readers as an admission of guilt. Chances are good that the story will appear anyway in some way, shape or form; make sure your point of view is included.

If the reporter’s query involves a specific matter for one of your clients (rather than a trend or a comment on a case involving another firm), be sure to get permission from the client before commenting. Even in cases where your representation is public – based on public documents -- you need specific permission before you can disclose the attorney-client relationship.

“Before you actually disclose any information to a reporter, be clear about your terms of use,” said DeGette. “If you want your discussion to be off-the-record, both parties must agree to these terms up front.” Journalists can use off-the-record information to uncover related facts or to find other sources that might be willing to speak on the record.

“Once a statement is ‘on the record,’ you should not expect that a reporter will take it off,” said DeGette. “Make sure that your lawyers understand this.”

“Off-the-record” or “background” information is not for publication. “Unattributable” information may be reported (without using direct quotes) and the source characterized in

very general terms (not sufficient to identify the speaker). Information that is “on the record” can be quoted and attributed to a source.

“Generally speaking, we only use an anonymous source when there is a good reason for anonymity and it is critical to an important story,” said Griffin. (*The Denver Post’s* policy on anonymous sources is available at <http://www.denverpost.com/ethics>.)

Meet the press

Lawyers and law firms that do not respect the practical and professional rules of professional journalism will only alienate reporters and editors – making it much less likely that they will want to work with you going forward.

“Nothing burns a relationship like working hard on a story, seeing it in a competing publication before you go to print and needing to scrap it,” said Cote. “You will not soon forget the lawyer or law firm that wasted your time.”

The panel concluded with a discussion of preferred ways for lawyers and law firms to build constructive relationships with the press. “The best way,” said Griffin, “is to be a steady, reliable and responsive source of ideas that lead to good stories – ideas that fall into the traditional news categories of first, best or most.”

Reporters and editors welcome invitations (off deadline) to meet face-to-face with lawyers for a focused discussion of their areas of expertise and potential story ideas. A good list of informed, reliable sources in a wide variety of practice areas -- who can be called upon for background or a quote -- is a valuable resource to any reporter covering a legal beat.

A law firm’s relationship with the press should be based on neither love nor hate. Rather, it should be based on mutual professionalism – where journalists understand and respect the needs of the legal profession and lawyers understand and respect the needs of the professional journalist.