

NEWS PUBLISHING AND THE ART OF WRITING

1: WHY NO NEWS IS BAD NEWS

Introduction

These practical tips will help you:

- reap rewards from a lively online news page
- build effective media relations
- write effectively so that your material attracts and keeps readers' attention.

Two other companion LawComms publications provide in-depth guidance:

- *Website Health Check – A Self-Assessment Guide*
- *E-marketing Made Easy – Strategies for Lawyers.*

Both are free to download at www.LawComms.com.

Online news: effective marketing for the cost conscious

News – on your Home Page and distributed to the media through news releases and to your contacts through e-mail – gives you competitive advantage and a powerful low-cost marketing tool:

- You can demonstrate your achievements and skills through news.
- News keeps your name in the minds of clients and potential clients – increasing the likelihood that they will think of you first.
- A successful media relations programme, establishing your name with journalists etc, will begin to generate spontaneous mentions of your name in the media.

How Chambers will gain from online news

Creating a powerful first impression with your Home Page is vital. To retain visitors, your Home Page needs to offer them interesting, relevant, material straightaway. Featuring online news on the Home Page makes this easy.

"The news section is an excellent window on the set's current work, reflecting our involvement in high profile cases", one senior clerk told me. "Our client contacts will probably look at our web site before calling the clerks or a barrister". Most clerks know that instructing solicitors are double-checking everything on line while on the phone to them.

Publishing well-presented up-to-date news stories on the Home Page keeps a website looking fresh. The Home Page will change as news is

added, so that regular clients making successive visits will see something different each time.

And Google will also pick up references in news items, so that regular news updates will contribute to good positioning for chambers in search results.

What if there are objections?

What concerns are commonly expressed, and how can they be addressed?

"We do not have enough going on", one clerk told me: But the Patents Court listed 24 reported cases in the name of just one junior IP specialist at his set. Mentions need not be restricted to reported or even high-profile cases. It would be hard to imagine that any reasonably busy set could be short of cases to mention online.

"Many of our cases are very sensitive": But many will be in the public domain already, and some will be reported in the media. Others - even advisory matters - can be mentioned as anonymised case studies. Barristers are already happy to list cases in their online profiles.

"We don't want to re-design our home page": One set I worked with had a news feature built into their home page design 2 years previously - but it had remained unused and hidden. In another case, minor inexpensive technical changes allowed news headlines and summaries to be added to the existing Home Page with links to details elsewhere.

"No-one has the time to do this": As a senior clerk said: "You have to undertake the same research anyway when you are preparing the Legal Directory submissions". Member profiles can also be updated with the same material. The overall time commitment is likely to be just a couple of hours a month. And even this can be delegated to people like LawComms.

"Members of chambers are not journalists - they're not going to be able to write news stories": Members themselves should not be expected to write copy for publication themselves, but should be able to provide briefing information. This guidance note provides tips on writing skills, but if you cannot develop capacity in-house, the work is easy to outsource, and would involve only a hour or two's activity per month.

Writing up a dummy news page, for internal use only, provides the ideal basis for discussion about how online news might benefit your chambers.

PART 2: HOW TO IMPLEMENT AN ONLINE NEWS PAGE

News items should be published on the Home Page, and should include updates about member's cases. This would give all visitors immediate information about the set's activities, and ensures that the Home Page is regularly refreshed, creating a different impression each time a regular user visits the site.

Pitfalls to avoid

Don't hide your news

The majority of chambers' websites hide news and announcements, relegating them to another page, out of sight, where visitors are unlikely to see them.

Some Bar websites have a menu on the Home Page providing a link to "News". But in quite a few instances, news could be found only from a subsidiary page, such as "About Us", 2 or 3 clicks from the Home Page. Relegating news updates to another page, out of sight, means that visitors are much less likely to see them.

Keep your news up-to-date

Another common mistake is the failure to update news. In the LawComms survey, only 86 of the 252 sites (34%) included recent items, published during the preceding month.

On many chambers' websites, June's latest "news" was hopelessly out of date. Frequently, the QC appointments announced in January or the "Chambers and Partners" and "Legal 500" legal directory recommendations published last autumn were the latest postings. Other examples included: "current" newsletter, published in spring 2006; requests for pupillage applications with a closing date months previously; invitations to seminars which had already taken place.

High-profile and well-resourced sets are not immune from problems. Of 22 winners of Chambers Bar Awards surveyed in September 2007, 3 sets had no news page at all, and 4 other sets have badly out-of-date news pages (for example with just one or two items from 2007, or in another instance, the top item dating from 2001).

Feature news about members' cases

Most sites featured only professional announcements (in the "Chambers congratulates..." style) or seminar details. Only about a quarter of news pages mentioned members' cases. Yet updates about members' cases provide the most effective way to demonstrate their skills and experience at a glance.

Different ways to feature news

Integrating news into the design of the Home Page proves that the site - and the set - are up-to-date. A well-written headline will encourage visitors to read more.

Scrolling headlines

Some sites use scrolling headlines (Brick Court is an example) but these can be too slow or too fast, take too long to load, or tell the visitor too little to tempt them to read the full story.

News headlines panel

A better option uses a panel on the Home Page which carries a series of headlines with short summaries of each story, and a link to full information on a news page; 4 Brick Court is an example.

Magazine cover format

The third way allows news to fill the Home Page; 39 Essex Street and Tooks Court have adopted this approach. 5RB does this simply and dramatically. Some - such as Matrix - try to adopt the style of a magazine cover, looking busy and attractive, and providing users with quick access to the content that they need.

Third party news feeds

Some sets have opted to use a news feed from a third-party provider - presumably because there is no one in-house with the time to write material. This has a double disadvantage: it tells visitors nothing about the work and qualities of the set itself; and it tempts them to go off to another website to follow up a story.

Sample sites

These Bar websites demonstrate a variety of approaches to the presentation of news:

www.39essex.com/index.php

www.5rb.co.uk

www.tooks.co.uk

www.2bedfordrow.co.uk.

PART 3: MEDIA RELATIONS

Getting attention for your news

News on the website, however good, has to wait for users to visit it. Pro-active e-marketing can enhance the value of a newspaper still further. Circulating an email, with links to a relevant news story, to key professional clients, media contacts, and opinion-formers will help keep the set's name in peoples' minds, generate positive publicity, and bring visitors to the website.

Using a website to spread information about case results and other developments provides a cost-effective easy-to-use marketing tool that can enable sets to gain significant competitive advantage. No news is bad news: sets lacking a good news page, and taking no steps to promote it, are missing a major opportunity to enhance their professional reputation.

A successful media relations programme, establishing your name with journalists etc, will begin to generate spontaneous mentions of your name in the media.

Planning for media relations

Make your news activity reinforce your overall strategy, and the messages that you are trying to convey through marketing.

For example, efforts to promote your strengths in representing employers could be undermined by a series of news reports highlighting your employment tribunal victories for applicants.

Focus on the people that your marketing plan says are important to the future of your practice or set.

Focus on the external audience

When you choose topics for online news and news releases, and when you write the information, put yourself in the position of a reader. Would this attract and keep their attention?

Focus on topics important to the audience you want to reach. Avoid merely touting your product or service. Avoid announcements which however much importance they have internally, lack relevance to or benefits for the outside world.

Plan ahead

Make a forward plan for your news activity, which should complement your overall marketing plan. Planning ahead allows you to gain maximum benefit from events such as court or tribunal decisions. Don't rely exclusively on reacting to events; plan pro-actively the topics you want to address.

Maximise use of members' casework experience

Your achievements for clients offer the best evidence of your skills and are the best way to demonstrate how you might help other clients.

Court and tribunal victories are obvious news items (many Bar websites could make much better use of this resource, as LawComms surveys show).

Advice, non-contentious work, background legal research and settled claims also offer opportunities, even if information is anonymised or presented as a case-study.

Solicitors should obtain client consent to publicity. Barristers should liaise with instructing solicitors to avoid duplicated or conflicting publicity.

Take advantage of external developments

Build into your planning the opportunity to analyse or react to:

- Court/tribunal judgements in cases other than your own
- Emerging trends from your casework
- Survey/research results
- Forthcoming legislation
- Consultation/green papers/white papers
- EU legal developments affecting the UK
- Topical legal issues
- Market trends.

PART 4: THE ART OF WRITING

Plan effectively

- What is the goal of the piece?
- Who is the target audience?
- What will appeal to *them*?
- What is your key single selling point?

Lead the reader to act

Cater for three stages through which readers will go:

1. Scanning: How will you catch the reader's attention, and encourage them to want to know more?
2. Review: What explanatory information will you provide, to keep the reader interested?
3. Action: What should readers do next to pursue their interest? Visit your website, send an e-mail, make a phone call? What will they get in return?

PS: In letters, an old trick that still works is to end with a postscript reminding readers of a key point (eg "Contact us in the next 14 days for a free evaluation of your claim").

Make headlines functional

- Make a positive statement
- Avoid cute headlines which conceal their real meaning
- Stimulate the reader to want to know more
- Ask a question in the headline only if it will intrigue readers enough to want to continue.
- Don't repeat the headline in the first line of text

Write crisply

- Use the active not the passive voice
- Keep paragraphs and sentences short
- Explain the key selling point at the beginning
- Keep to one topic per paragraph
- Avoid jargon and acronyms – write in plain language.

Draw the reader in

- Write about your readers: talk about “you”
- Use the active not passive voice
- Sound positive

Make it easy to scan the text rapidly

- Break up longer pieces using sub-headings, bullet points, numbered lists, *italicised* or emboldened text
- Numerals stand out – 4 out of 5 people agree
- Don't overuse capitals: lower case is easier to read.

Gain and keep attention

- Appeal to the reader's self-interest or anxieties
- Offer real benefits
- Emphasise the unexpected, unique, or new

Don't oversell

- Think and write from the buyer's perspective – not your own
- Don't oversell your product or your company
- If you have any evidence about the benefits you claim, provide it

And remember....

- Beware of race, gender or age bias or assumptions. Apart from legal risks, you can immediately alienate important sections of your audience.
- Take care with humour – jokes are not always universally funny.
- Check all spelling – remember that computerised spellchecker and grammar checkers may not catch every mistake
- Double-check telephone, fax, and e-mail details and spellings of named companies and individuals.

PART 5: ISSUING NEWS RELEASES

Before your begin

Part 3 recommended that you should devise a forward plan for your media relations, and this should be your starting point.

Pause to consider whether there are reasons not to publish a particular story online or in a news release:

- Is there an adverse media agenda that your story could inadvertently trigger? Remember headlines about compensation culture, benefit cheats, political correctness/human rights gone mad, criminals' charter, fatcat lawyers.
- If your client is named or could be identified, are they aware of the potential consequences of publicity (unwelcome attention in the street or supermarket?), and have they given consent informed by that awareness?
- Does your client have anything in their background which could be discovered and used adversely? (For example, the sex discrimination claimant pictured on her photographer boyfriend's website).
- Even if a case-result is in the public domain, is there are reason to avoid further publicity? A bus-driver would not want additional publicity for an acquittal on driving offences. A personal injury claimant might wish to avoid neighbours hearing about a significant damages award. A businessman acquitted of sexual offences might not want details maintained on your website.

The art of writing

All the rules in Part 4 apply. To summarise: write crisply, in short sentences, using the active voice.

Write the news releases in the same style used by the media you are targeting (so that it would not appear out of place if reproduced word for word).

Content and format of news releases

Summarise the whole story in the first sentence

Give your item a self-explanatory title which summarises factually what the story is about.

The first sentence should answer the questions: WHO, WHAT, WHERE and WHEN. It should be possible to understand the entire message of the item by reading only the first sentence.

Go on to explain the story and why it is important

The body of the news item goes on to deal with WHY, giving a more detailed explanation.

Describe the factual background. Give full details such as dates, names and locations.

The content should relate to the interests of the audience. Avoid merely touting your product or service. Explain how people can benefit (saving money, saving time, gaining peace of mind, pre-empting problems). Address readers' self-interest or concern.

For example, if you are writing about a recent case (whether you or someone else acted in it) highlight the importance of the case and the impact of the decision on:

- The client concerned
- Other people in similar positions: "thousands will be denied compensation..."
- Public interest: "...a loophole has now been closed..."
- The law: "this is the first time the courts have pronounced on how this new law will apply..."

Adopt this approach in telling your story:

- *Relevant*: It might happen to you. You could benefit. Don't lose out. Could you be at risk?
- *Timely*: There's still time to act.
- *Tone*: We are the experts.
- *Message*: You can take action to avoid this risk. You might need advice. Pitfalls you might face if you go it alone.

Highlight any facts specific to the local or specialist audience that you intend the piece to reach. Quote statistics or demographics if obtainable.

End the News Release with a "Note for Editors"

At the end of your News Release, give the name, telephone numbers (land and mobile) and email address of a contact person from whom journalists can obtain further information.

Provide a short description of your organisation ("Established in Manchester in the 1970s, the firm now has branches across the North West, and with 300 staff, provides a one-stop shop for all personal and business legal services").

Add any background technical information (eg more detail of a legislative provision) which may help the journalist's understanding.

Distributing your news release

Send out your news release to the right people at the right time

Before sending a press release, check the deadlines for the publication or programme in which you want coverage – lead times for magazines and supplements tend to be longer than you would expect.

If you don't want the information published before a specific date, include the words "EMBARGO: not to be published before [time] on [date]".

E-mailed press releases should be in plain text with no attachments. Head the message "News Release" with a self-explanatory title which indicates factually what the story is about.

Send your release to the news desk or relevant specialist editor, unless you have been able to identify a named contact.

Be prepared for follow-up

Contacts named in your news release **MUST** be available to handle calls.

Brief relevant colleagues when a news release is issued or a news item published online, so they are not taken by surprise should they be contacted direct.

If you get a difficult media enquiry, take time to think. Tell the caller you'll ring back within an agreed time. And do so.

YOUR NEXT STEPS

News can provide powerful support for your marketing. Begin with a methodical approach, planning which audiences you want to reach, and what stories will interest them. Online, adapt your Home Page so that headlines can be displayed, linking to full stories on a News Page. Highlight members' achievements, demonstrating your set's strength and depth of experience. Extend your online news by distributing news releases to the media. Designate someone with the time, energy and authority to undertake the tough job of obtaining news stories from colleagues. Ensure you have the skills and resources to write material for publication and to support implementation.

Gerald Newman runs LawComms, www.LawComms.com, which specialises in marketing communications for lawyers. Gerald formerly practised as a solicitor, launched major communications and online projects for the Law Society, and was Practice Director with Cloisters Chambers in the Temple.

Gerald Newman

gerald.newman@lawcomms.com

www.LawComms.com

07798 604851

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