



PRACTICE

Lawyers missing opportunity to be thought leaders

BY **PETE BURDON**

LAW IS ONE PROFESSION WHERE THERE ARE MAJOR OPPORTUNITIES for lawyers to become recognised thought leaders in their areas of expertise. This allows them to stand above their competition when it comes to reputations and visibility.

But very few take advantage of this, leaving the door open to the few who know the value of thought leadership and how to achieve and maintain it.

A skim through the websites and social media platforms of law firms of all shapes and sizes highlights this. While they generally look professional and contain interesting information, there's nothing to suggest they are a better option than the firm down the road.

What would change this?

There are many ways to stand out from the competition. The most obvious, easiest and cheapest is to get news

media attention and show this on all platforms. The third party endorsement this offers is priceless, particularly in today's world where every firm has its own voice and is hard to differentiate against.

This has become a problem for most industries. Have you ever tried to find a good web provider, real estate agent or financial advisor? If you don't know one or have someone recommended, it's hard to distinguish the good from the bad. That's where thought leadership comes in. If you are known as the expert, and not just because you say you are, and have a few testimonials on your website, you will get far more clients.

How do you become a thought leader?

It's important to know what I mean by the term, thought leader. It's someone who is well known and respected for their expertise and is often seen talking about it. An example of a high-profile thought leader would be Donald Trump

before he became President. He was a real estate thought leader. He was often in the media talking about it, he wrote a book and was regularly seen presenting on the topic.

Lawyers don't need to be like Donald Trump to achieve this status. You will have your own niche. Your legal focus may be employment, tax, construction, immigration or something else. Your aim would be to become a thought leader in that niche. This doesn't have to include regular appearances on television or writing your own book, although it could.

Start with the news media

The key is to do things your competitors are not doing and growing your profile outside the standard company newsletter, social media posts and the news section on the website. The best place to start is with the news media, and specifically, the niche media frequented by your target market. Editors of trade publications and industry magazines are often crying out for material to fill their pages and would probably love to hear from you.

Often niche magazines are staffed by an editor alone, so they welcome approaches from people with relevant material that could be featured. Even though circulation numbers will be lower than the higher profile outlets, if it's your niche, it's gold.

This isn't to say you should not target bigger media outlets. It will all depend on what you have to offer. For example, if you are an employment lawyer, your advice for businesses around new industrial relations laws could be of major interest to business reporters at metropolitan daily newspapers.

What do media want?

When I was a reporter, I was always amazed at how so few people understood what I needed for my stories. This is a common complaint of all media.

What most people forget is that there is one question that reporters, editors and producers ask when they decide whether your story idea has merit. "Will this be of interest to my audience?" That's it, simple. But you'd be surprised by how many people don't keep this in mind when looking for free publicity.

Media love anything that relates to something that's already in the news. This is where lawyers have a huge opportunity. If any topical story has a legal angle, you can get coverage. Just think of recent issues: the mosque attacks in Christchurch, the Capital Gains Tax, housing shortages and business confidence to name a few.

When there's something in the news that you could comment on, or suggest your own angle on, you can get covered. Pitching a guest article on these issues or any other advice you could offer people in your niche is also a great option. The possibilities are endless and remember that this is all totally free of charge and does wonders to your reputation. That's because you have been endorsed by the media outlet running your content. Anyone can write a newsletter story, but hardly anyone is writing for media.

How do you communicate with media?

Most media will tell you email is their preferred communication tool when it comes to receiving story or article pitches. This is because they can look at it when they have time and they don't like being interrupted by a phone call.

For any reporter or editor who may be someone you can see yourself dealing with a lot, it's a good idea to contact them for a chat, or better still, meet them for a coffee to get to know them. They won't always take you up on the offer, but they will remember you. Ask them for their preferred communication tool, because there are still some who prefer a phone call, and very few, but some, who like social media.

When you do pitch someone through email, tell them in the email why their audience would be interested. Keep this very brief, possibly with a few bullet points.

Press releases can be a good idea to send to some media, but only if you have time and still include a personal pitch. These can be good for niche media as sometimes they will literally cut and paste it into their publication.

A press release is less important for broadcasting media, and even major metropolitan newspapers. They tend to use your pitch as a carrot and then contact you for an interview. However, if it's something big and you have the time, a press release certainly wouldn't hurt.

But don't forget the difference between an article and a news story. You would never send a press release if you are proposing a guest article, because if they accept your article idea they would then ask you to write it. Articles are also written in first person, while press releases are in third person.

The key is to do things your competitors are not doing and growing your profile outside the standard company newsletter, social media posts and the news section on the website.

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Retiring from practice

The train journey of professional life

BY **PETER MCMENAMIN**

IT'S A JOURNEY FOR WHICH YOU HAVE A ONE-WAY TICKET. At the beginning you strive to get professional qualifications, a job, perhaps a practice. And once on board it is a continuum of events, places and people, all of whom seem important. The stops are usually brief and intermittent, but nothing seems to stop the locomotive of practice and its demands. But one day, the ticket expires, and there is a stop at which you must leave the train, never to return.

When and where will that be? Will you make that choice, or will some one, or some thing, make it for you?

It is important, no – essential – to look ahead and have a plan for the day when you leave the train. Recognise and realise that as a work junkie you need to wean yourself off the adrenaline of practise and prepare for another life.

And yes, there is another life, and just as you needed training to practise, you need preparation to retire successfully.

Failure to recognise your professional limitations has serious implications for yourself, your colleagues, and your clients. We have all no doubt witnessed the spectacle of the grey or white headed practitioner, bent over, shuffling into a law office, picking through some files, perhaps making a phone call, and then wandering around looking for something apparently missing, when what is really missing is the realisation that he/she is “over it”. And sometimes colleagues are too embarrassed to tell the person concerned that it is “time to go”. We all have a “use by date” professionally, and we should not embarrass ourselves, our colleagues or our clients by failing to recognise it. Ignoring the date opens the door to a potential liability.

The plan

1. Accept that you will retire and that you are not irreplaceable.
2. Formulate a date on which you think you might retire.
3. Discuss this with first, your spouse or partner, and second with your colleagues. If you are a sole practitioner

Planning

If you want to start growing yourself as a thought leader through the news media, there are a few simple steps to take. Firstly, you need to identify the media to target and research them to see what sorts of stories and articles they run. For example, lots of magazines publish guest articles, but some don't.

When you find the best media outlets, find the relevant person and contact them directly. For a daily newspaper this would be a specialist reporter who covers a particular area like business, while a niche magazine may be the editor. Try to avoid email addresses like news@... as they often get lost and it's impossible to personalise messages to such addresses. Start small with a few people and slowly grow the amount of media people you have as targets.

The vital last step

While most of the hard work is done when you appear in the media, the most important step comes next. You need to make the coverage prominent on your website, share it on social media sites, through newsletters and in marketing material. That's because lots of people won't see you in the publication or on the broadcast programme, but you can make sure they see you at a later date.

This is a great way to stand out from the competition. There are other ways you can do this too, like writing a book, or contributing a chapter in one. But to get your thought leadership status off the ground, growing your reputation and profile through the news media is a great place to start. ■

Pete Burdon is founder and head media trainer of [PeteBurdon.com](http://www.PeteBurdon.com) and Media Training NZ. He's a former daily newspaper reporter and government press secretary. Pete helps professionals and business leaders transform themselves into respected and recognised thought leaders through the news media and other channels. For more on Pete visit www.PeteBurdon.com