

## Marketing of lawyers requires twist on old approach

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News Editor

State regulations in regard to advertising for law agencies are stringent, meaning law firms must have a focused approach to their marketing and branding efforts to keep their names in front of existing and potential clients.

Attorneys and legal counsel were not able to market their services until the 1977 ruling of *Bates vs. State Bar of Arizona*, which held that advertising by lawyers was a kind of commercial speech protected by the First Amendment. Since then, states have put restrictions on acceptable marketing practices.

"There are all kinds of requirements surrounding what you can and can't do from a marketing standpoint," said Dona Stohler, chief marketing and business development officer for Ice Miller LLP. "You really have to be aware of what you are allowed and not allowed to do within your state."



Jeanne M. Buddingh (left), partner at Buddingh & Associates, Inc., and Denice A. Gierach, founder of Gierach Law Firm.

These rules include the portrayal of judges, paid testimonials, use of actors or fictionalized persons, irrelevant characteristics of the lawyers, ads that resemble legal documents, use of a nickname or moniker, and more.

"Law firm marketing activities are regulated by the legal community," said Jeanne M. Buddingh, partner at Buddingh & Associates, Inc. in Naperville. "But the goal of marketing—promoting your business, attracting new clients and increasing the bottom line—is the same for all businesses regardless of industry."

Typically, target markets for law firms are either geographically specific, industry specific or specific to a service—the latter being the predominant strategy of niche and boutique firms. Naperville-based Gierach Law Firm (GLF), a client of Buddingh & Associates, is one of those niche firms.

"Their practice centers around business law and estate planning," Buddingh said. "Their targets are businesses, their owners and individuals in need of estate planning."

"Regionally, we looked at zip codes to determine the distance clients would travel from to utilize their services. Recognizing where the GLF client base is located was important in determining what methods to use to market the firm."

Those methods may include e-mail, print, radio, and television, but the most effective forms are expert articles, speaking engagements, sponsorships and networking.

"It's a marketing continuum," Ice Miller's Stohler said. "There has to be recognition. You have to have a brand so that when people do encounter legal problems, you're top of mind as a law firm.

"Then you have to do a lot of things like programs where people can meet and engage with our lawyers on a one-to-one, personal basis, because that's really where the actual work happens. But you have to have both and they have to be integrated."

Social media platforms appear to be the wave of the future for the advertising industry and most law firms have begun implementing them as well in their marketing strategies.

"We are just starting to look at that for GLF," said Buddingh. "We have used social media platforms for other clients and have found success in building awareness and promoting their brand."

For Buddingh, positioning Denice A. Gierach, founder of Gierach Law Firm, as an expert in her field is crucial to the overall strategic plan for the company.

"This is a long-term strategy that we put in place in 2005," Buddingh said. "With Denice's impressive credentials—CPA, a master's in business management and a law degree—positioning her as an expert has helped differentiate her and her practice from the competition."

To that end, Buddingh has found numerous outlets to have Gierach's writing published, in both print and online formats. (Gierach writes the current "Law Talk" column for The Business Ledger.)

"Each article is looked upon as an asset to the firm and we like to leverage each column to gain the most mileage out of it," she said. "This is to ensure that Denice's time spent on crafting an article is time spent well."

Stohler has found that the most effective marketing, that which generates the most business, is to get the lawyers out of the office and in front of potential clients.

"They need to be in the mix," she said. "They need to be able to form those personal relationships with the business people that are making the decisions to purchase legal services."