

Making the Transition to Media Relations

Thomas Adcock
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"It's hard for attorneys to make the transition," says Leah Guggenheimer of the tricky business of switching from associate to law firm marketing and public relations. "For one thing, you see a lot of 'J.D.s need not apply' in the ads."

Even so, Guggenheimer, 34, managed to leave behind her six years as a litigator last May to become director of marketing and business development at New York-based Darby & Darby, an intellectual property boutique.

A big part of her new job involves the politesse of helpfully placing herself between the 85 lawyers of her firm and nosy reporters. Luckily for Guggenheimer, there is a new network of law firm administrators just like her, people who are often the only ones who do what they do at their respective firms.

"I joined right away," said Guggenheimer, "to learn more about my public relations responsibilities."

The network, which was recently given the official name "Law Firm Media Professionals," is the brainchild of two former journalists: Joshua Peck, 45, director of media relations at Chicago-based Kirkland & Ellis, and Dara McQuillan, 29, communications and media manager at New York-based Shearman & Sterling.

Peck, who was a reporter in Westchester County and Ann Arbor, Mich., and who also worked as a political press secretary, says the job of law firm spokesperson is a "relatively new profession" that has many of its practitioners asking a host of questions. Thus, the network he and McQuillan created.

Just how large the group will become is anybody's guess, says Peck. Twelve persons showed up for an inaugural session this summer, which grew to 30 during last month's meeting. Peck estimates there may be as many as 40 full-time law firm spokespersons in the city.

Other lawyers-cum-spokespersons who have signed on include Jim Ponichtera at New York-based Stroock & Stroock & Lavan, and Maziel Abrego with the New York office of the Argentinian firm Alfaró-Abogados.

Meetings are rather informal, McQuillan said, and modeled after a similarly loose series of get-togethers he attended during his Los Angeles days as a story editor at Universal Pictures, a gig that followed his reportorial duties at *Variety*, the film and television industry journal.

"Once a month, we'd get together at Madame Wu's [a restaurant] in Santa Monica," said McQuillan. "Without giving away trade secrets, we'd discuss what was going on and we'd help each other."

"In the legal media field, we deal with the same reporters, the same issues, and we have the same challenges."

The challenges, says Peck, involve educating lawyers about reporters.

"I tell them, never argue with anybody who buys ink by the 500-gallon drum," said Peck. "And there are a number of ways of reacting to an unfavorable story. All of them involve congeniality."

Lawyers can easily afford congeniality, as they tend to earn higher salaries than reporters. Lawyer spokespersons are known to be easygoing as well, perhaps due to annual salaries ranging from about \$60,000 to as much as \$200,000.

Still, in private, law firm media relations people have their gripes.

"We need to get together for tips and techniques and contacts," said Guggenheimer. "And to vent."

The next meeting is Sept. 30.

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