

December 4 – 10, 2006

PR Expert Says Lawyers Can Advertise Without Complexes

MARKETING: Carl Terzian discusses commercialization versus professionalism in law.

By **JOEL RUSSELL** - LOS ANGELES BUSINESS JOURNAL STAFF

For nearly 40 years, Carl Terzian has helped lawyers market themselves. Along the way he has discovered how to navigate the gray area between the dignity of the profession and the commercial demand to hustle new business.



Early in his career Terzian, chief executive of public relations firm Carl Terzian Associates in Los Angeles, wrote an article for the California State Bar Association magazine to explain his methods. The editors accepted it for publication, but deleted one sentence: “Don’t be afraid to ask for the business.” They needn’t have been so concerned, Terzian said.

“You don’t have to destroy your professionalism to market yourself,” said Terzian. “It’s all a matter of how to give out your business card, how you refer business to others without expecting them to return the favor immediately, how you network at the Rotary Club without being obnoxious, or how you give a speech without bragging.”

Until 30 years ago, lawyers were prohibited from advertising, but today “the bottom line is that if it’s not false or misleading, you can do it,” according to Arthur Garwin, counsel to the Standing Committee on Professionalism for the American Bar Association. While some lawyers feel advertising isn’t appropriate – or may not need to – it has become widespread in the profession, Garwin added.

“Not everyone does TV, but just look in the Yellow Pages,” he said “In general, the less pricey, less splashy advertising vehicles are more commonly used.”

With his experienced perspective, Terzian calls advertising “a new wrinkle” in the battle for customers. Even today, many firms stick to tombstone ads in local newspapers. Terzian maintains that his public-relations approach to marketing has always been permitted in the professions – but plenty of them don’t practice it.

In spite of its reputation as a gentleman’s profession, lawyers must compete as intensely as other service providers in the L.A. economy. According to the 2002 Economic Census, Los Angeles County had about 7,000 law firms, 2,400 CPA firms, 2,900 architectural and engineering firms, and 3,100 management consultants.

Terzian utilizes a two-pronged approach. First, he markets the institutional name of the firm to increase its prestige. At the same time, since most people choose a lawyer because of the individual involved, Terzian selects a few partners in the law firm for personalized campaigns. The strategies for each individual depend on what the specific lawyer feels comfortable doing – one might enjoy writing articles, another might give speeches, while a third concentrates on public service, for example.

In promoting lawyers as experts, he often gets them to pen advice stories or opinion pieces for the trade press, no matter how small the audience.

Every year, Terzian Associates puts about 500 people on nonprofit boards around the country. “We train the lawyer on how to be a productive board member and how to tastefully market himself as a board member,” Terzian said.

The American Bar Association has issued ethics opinions about serving on boards, said Garwin, but they deal with the conflicts of interest in serving on a client’s board. To play it safe, lawyers should network with other board members to generate business and avoid doing legal work for the organization itself.

Sometimes the law firm itself hinders Terzian’s plan. One of his clients became president of the California State Chambers of Commerce, giving him the opportunity to testify before government committees, deliver keynote addresses and meet with top executives. The chamber’s board alone had more than 50 chief executives. But instead of letting him network with these people, the law firm demanded a full 40-hour workweek.

“I would have dispatched him to market being president of the state chamber,” said Terzian. “They still had requirements of billable hours, so they probably lost millions of dollars in business.”