

Coordinating communications efforts

By Clifton Barnes

Communications is key to any good governmental affairs program but there can be tension between good lobbyists and good communicators. Understanding the issues and everyone's role in those issues is key to a successful effort, panelists said during a session at the National Association of Bar Executives annual meeting in Washington, D.C. in August.

"The perspectives of good lawyers, good communicators and good lobbyists can all be very different," said Stephanie Orbals-Tibbs, director of the ABA Media Relations and Public Policy Communications department. "They all really need to work together to make things happen in the legislature."

How you say something, when you say something, whether or not you say something and to whom you say it are areas that communicators and lobbyists need to address.

When it's a legislative issue, bars need to error on the side of the lobbyist, panelists agreed, however they should respect the views of the communicator and take them into consideration.

"It's a bit of give and take," Orbals-Tibbs said. "You kinda get a feel when you need to give a little bit."

Robert Evans, associate executive director of the ABA Governmental Affairs Office, said that with constant interaction between communications and governmental relations, the relationship can work nicely.

"Media relations is not our focus (in governmental affairs). It's not the first thing we think of," Evans said. "It's good to have a media relations person in on our meetings who is focused on it."

Many times the audience may be an audience of one and you don't want it addressed through the media. "You might want to lower the profile sometimes," he said. "For instance you probably wouldn't want the subject of judicial raises to be on radio talk shows."

Communicators are apt to want to get the message out there while lobbyists often don't want the information widely distributed.

"An experienced PR person can look at the situation and say this issue is something the public has a compelling interest in or it's an issue that the public is not interested in now," said audience member Dan Cirucci, associate executive director for the Philadelphia Bar's Communications & Public Affairs department. "And, no, the judicial salaries issue is not an easy spin."

While informing the public can be helpful to a cause, many times lobbyists need to work with communicators when it's not.

"I use certain words carefully so as not to allow people to see my strategy," said Jennifer Boese, governmental relations coordinator for the State Bar of Wisconsin. "Sometimes you have to work with the PR and media people so they understand not to put a message out that day on a certain issue because it might have implications for other areas within the bar."

Some attorney members might want the bar to say something like, "They're stomping on human rights. They're trampling on the Constitution" but you can't do that, Evans said.

On the flip side, sometimes bars might take a stand that some of its members don't like. "Sometimes it just the right thing to do," Boese said, "whether or not some members like it or whether or not some people think we're too liberal or too conservative."

The balance between internal and external communications can be tricky. "It might be very different talking with a member versus a member of the media," Ortals-Tibbs. "It's tough to reassure members you are working on a problem without alienating them."

She said she's had over-anxious members who forward emails to a reporter and that information gets worked into a story in the newspaper.

Boese said she has had email newsletters forwarded to legislators. The way she would have said worded the issues to legislators is far different than the way she worded it for an internal audience.

"I'd simply say that you should make sure you don't put anything in legislative alerts and policy papers that you don't want to see in the paper," Boese said.

While governmental affairs people have, by necessity, become good wordsmiths in their own right, it's best to go to the experts in communications for assistance.

"The content of the message in letters and talking points are almost always massaged with the public relations people," Evans said.

Ortals-Tibbs said her communications department takes what governmental relations uses internally and reworks it to provide fact sheets for the media and talking points for the president.

Building up trust between governmental affairs and communications takes a long time and therefore it's important for staff to be at the bar a while, Cirucci said. High turnover can slow the efforts.

Ortals-Tibbs said she builds relationships and good communications by simply "walkin' around." She informally chats with governmental affairs

people and they might mention where they are on a certain issue. “I may ask if there is anything else perking with an issue,” she said. “I may never use anything I hear but I’m in the loop. I understand the issues and I’m building relationships.”