

Practical Success

Cordell M. Parvin

Practical Tips on Being on the Top of Mind When Potential Clients Need a Lawyer

I'm sad to tell you this is my last Practical Lawyer column. I've been writing here since 2007 and I feel like you deserve to hear from a different voice.

My friend and former colleague Eric Fletcher will be taking over. He was on our marketing team at my old firm and I learned a great deal from him. So will you.

In this last column, I want to focus on ideas that will help you be top of mind when your potential client needs a lawyer. It is a timely subject because I just recently learned that a lawyer I coached in 2011 has developed such an outstanding national profile that he was recently quoted by CNN on a topic of great importance to his potential clients.

But, what if you are a young lawyer? A young environmental lawyer I coached a few years ago sat across from me and showed me her firm bio. Then she showed me several bios of lawyers she believed



to be the preeminent environmental lawyers in the country.

I looked at each of their bios and noted that in addition to being at least 15 years more experienced than her, each had a substantial list of articles they had written and presentations they had made. I told the lawyer that she could start building her profile now by writing and speaking and I shared my story with her.

In a previous column, I described deciding in 1978 to focus my practice on representing, highway and bridge contractors (called highway, heavy civil as opposed to building construction. I lived in Roanoke Virginia. No one in Roanoke, much less in Virginia or the rest of the United States knew that would be my specialty.

I had to come up with a plan to build my profile. Based on government contracts lawyers

Cordell M. Parvin built a national construction practice during his 35 years of practicing law. In 2005, Mr. Parvin left the firm and started Cordell Parvin LLC. He now works with lawyers and law firms on career development, planning, and client development. You can subscribe to his Blog at <http://www.cordellblog.com/>, connect with him on LinkedIn at <http://www.linkedin.com/in/cordellparvin>, join his Facebook Fan Page at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Cordell-Parvin-Lawyer-Coaching/222291473905?ref=ts>, and follow him on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/cordellparvin>

and construction lawyers who were role models, I decided that writing and speaking were the best ways I could become known. Looking back now, I am surprised how patient I was at the time.

In 1981 I spoke at the ABA Annual Meeting in New Orleans (in August when I changed shirts three times a day) and in 1981 the law review article I wrote was published by the ABA Public Contracts Law Journal. When I received 1000 bound copies of my law review article, I immediately sent them to highway contractors.

I really did not expect contractors to actually read my law review article. I hoped they would put it on a shelf and come back to it when a legal issue arose.

At the same time, I started speaking every chance I could get in Roanoke. Even in a city the size of Roanoke (about 110,000 people), there were numerous construction industry associations that typically met once a month and needed speakers.

I spoke to every one of them over a couple of years. My subject was what they needed to know after the Kansas City Hyatt Regency Hotel Walkway collapse that occurred in 1981. Over many months I researched as much as I could about what happened and what the legal implications were.

I presented it as a story and was able to connect with the construction industry audiences that were anxious to know about that well publicized disaster. Today, instead of months of research, you could easily find all I found by a Google search.

In 1981 I was asked to speak at the Virginia Road and Transportation Builders Association (“VRTBA”) Annual Meeting in November. I remember being unable to sleep that night as I visualized the audience and rehearsed what I planned to say the next day without slides or notes.

(If you speak without slides or notes, you are forced to become a good story teller.)

On Saturday I made the presentation and it really went well. Fortunately, or you might just call it luck, one of the American Road and Transportation Builders Association (“ARTBA”) senior executives heard me and decided I should speak at the next ARTBA Contractors Meeting.

With that one incredible opportunity, I was off to the races. When I finished my presentation, I was asked to speak at other ARTBA state chapters. Later, I was asked to speak to the National Asphalt Pavement Association (NAPA) and the American Concrete Pavement Association (ACPA) annual meetings.

Call it luck again, after one presentation, a man approached me. He told me he was the editor of Roads & Bridges magazine, and wanted to interview me. I told him that was fine, but why didn't he have me write a monthly legal column for the magazine. He agreed and I wrote the column until I left my law practice to teach and coach lawyers.

How You Can Build Your Profile

How can you build your profile? In a nutshell, find a topic of incredible importance and write or present it in a way that your clients and potential clients will pay attention. Today, the internet has made it easier to find topics and easier to publish something. Instead of waiting to be asked to write for a publication, a lawyer can create his or her own blog.

The challenge for you is to write something that is incredibly important to your clients and potential clients. How can you do it? Identify a problem or an opportunity that it is important. If you stay on top of your clients' business and write about an important topic before other lawyers, you will generate interest.

I did that back in 1982, when I started writing about Disadvantaged Business Enterprise legal issues. I did it again in the mid-80s when I started writing about the challenges designing and constructing cable-stayed and segmental bridges. I did it again in the early 90s when I started writing about design-build as a method to construct complicated highway and bridge construction projects. Finally, I did it again when I wrote to warn contractors to create compliance and ethics programs after WorldCom and Enron.

How did I find the topics before others? I was insatiable studying anything that changed in the industry. You can do that more easily now because of the internet.

Well, that's it for me here. I know you will find Eric's ideas new, refreshing and helpful. If you want to keep up with me, subscribe to my blog: www.cordellblog.com.

To purchase the online version of this article—or any other article in this publication—go to www.ali-cle.org and click on “Publications.”