



Image

As I write this, I have just returned from the president's tour of the Upper Peninsula. Talking to State Bar members in the U.P., I realized that the members have many of the same concerns as the attorneys that I practice with every day, and one of these is the image that the general public has of lawyers.

This problem is not a new one, although I think each generation of lawyers believes that they live in times when the public perception of lawyers reaches its nadir. Even Abraham Lincoln, that paragon of lawyerly virtue, complained of the public's perception of lawyers when he practiced law. (He advertised in the newspaper too, but that's another column.)

While the problem of lawyer public image is not new or different today, perhaps the twist on today's image problem is how quickly a damaging example of bad behavior spreads—the Internet is always on, the news channels are always broadcasting, and there seems to be no shortage of lawyers behaving badly during a deposition that flies across the Internet, or lawyers having a press conference that is definitely sensational but of questionable news value.

Many members ask the State Bar what we, as an organization, can do about the public perception of lawyers. The State Bar has tried various programs in the past to improve the image of lawyers. Regretfully, we have been unsuccessful. The programs have ranged from creating a series of public service announcements and buying the air time to broadcast them, to placing a series of op-ed pieces in various newspapers throughout the state, to encouraging leadership and members to respond to lawyer attacks through letters to the editor.

Each of these avenues has its drawbacks. The public service announcements were

beautiful, but the cost of creating and placing them in various media outlets was enormous, and the public perception of lawyers didn't change after they aired. Additionally, we could never afford to buy enough air time to compete with the regular news outlet stories. The op-ed pieces drew positive attention, but when and where they ran was completely out of our control. They also hit a much smaller slice of the public, only running in the print media, which has a shrinking audience. Letters to the editor, while also having a positive response, also had similar problems, with the additional problem that local newspapers controlled when they would be published. Similar programs attempted by larger organizations such as the American Bar Association met with the same fate, even with that group's larger reach and resources to devote to the issue.

So, what to do? I would assert that our most valuable asset in this matter is our members. The general public dislikes and distrusts lawyers as a group, but they like and trust their individual lawyer. Each of us has the ability to influence public perception of our profession by our own acts and behaviors. I think that we must first highlight what our individual members do, trumpet those achievements, and rely on that to affect public perception.

Any of you who were lucky enough to attend our Awards Dinner at the 2006 State Bar Annual Meeting saw proof positive of this. The stories of our members who re-

ceived the Champion of Justice Award, Liberty Bell Award, Frank J. Kelley Distinguished Public Service Award, and the Roberts P. Hudson Award were positively awe-inspiring. You could not listen to their stories and not be profoundly moved by the depth of the winners' commitment to their individual causes, by the wide range of worthwhile projects with which our members are involved, and with the wide range of people they are positively affecting. (Those of you who couldn't attend can find a short recap of the winners' achievements in the September 2006 *Michigan Bar Journal*.) We should each aspire to make such a change in our own communities.

Second, I think we, as a profession, must accept that doing the job of a lawyer, being a zealous advocate for the cause of our client, popular or not, does not always guarantee a place at the top of the "most admired" lists. Those who defend the rights of the minority against the sentiment of the majority are not destined to be universally accepted. Does this mean that we must condone uncivil, unnecessarily divisive behavior? Absolutely not. We can model the behavior we expect others to display toward us. We can show new attorneys how to be effective advocates without all the rancor. We can continue to educate the public about what we do, why we do it, how we do it, and why it's so necessary. And we can accept that the nature of our work isn't guaranteed to make our profession universally popular. ♦

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