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Feature Story

New tool for law-firm recruiting: Podcasts

By Dick Dahl Staff writer

A new tool has emerged among law firms seeking to attract top young legal talent: podcasts.

Until now, law firms have typically used podcasts as a marketing device - a way of attracting and retaining clients by providing useful information in a multi-media format that can be played on mobile devices as well as computers.

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But during this fall's recruitment season, some podcasting law firms turned their attention to a new audience: second-year law students seeking summer-associate positions. These firms see it is a way for them to stand out in the stiff competition for top young talent.

The 'tech savvy' appeal

If you want to attract cutting-cutting edge talent, you ought to have cutting-edge recruitment methods, according to Julie Gurney, marketing

communications manager at Benesch, Friedlander, Coplan & Aronoff in Cleveland, Ohio.

"When students see we're tech-savvy enough to recruit by podcasting, that we're not one of those old fuddy-duddy firms that do the same thing year after year, I think it makes an impression," said Gurney.

The firm's approach was to create one 20-minute podcast in which four existing summer associates sat around a table with a moderator and talked about their experiences at the firm.

In Boston, Goulston & Storrs took a different approach, creating 16 brief podcasts ranging in duration from 40 seconds to slightly more than two minutes, each addressing specific topics identified by the firm's summer associates as subjects that were of greatest interest to aspiring young lawyers.

Douglas M. Husid, co-managing director of the 190-lawyer firm, said the idea was hatched

during informal discussion earlier this year.

"Several of us were talking about how ubiquitous iPods have become, and then we started talking about podcasting and what we might be able to with it," he said.

As fall approached, partners identified recruitment as a logical first step.

"These law students, who are highly recruited, are making a decision that will account for a significant chunk of their lives," Husid said. "It's important to make sure you're giving them the information they want."

The firm turned to the summer associates themselves to determine what law students want to know, and designed most of the 16 podcasts to answer those questions.

For example, one podcast focuses on how work is allocated to associates; another on what it's like to be a woman at the firm. In the second podcast, summer associate Kate Heller, now a 3L at Northeastern University School of Law, spoke about the guidance a partner gave her in understanding a hotel licensing matter.

Heller told Lawyers USA that the recruitment podcasts have been well received among her fellow students at Northeastern. A year earlier, when she was trying to decide where to intern, she had to make dozens of phone calls to track down older students to ask them about their experiences at various firms. But this year, many Northeastern students embraced the Goulston & Storrs podcasts.

"They really liked it," said Heller. "I think they liked that it was something easy that they could do to prepare and didn't require hunting people down and calling them. And anything we can do to multi-task is great. Podcasts are great because you can listen to them anywhere, like walking down the street on the way to class."

At 135-lawyer Benesch Friedlander, summer associate Calista Puchmeyer, now a 3L at Cleveland-Marshall College of Law, reports a similar reaction.

"People I've talked to have said they found it very helpful," she said. "They said it's nice to have another law student's perspective on what it's like to work there."

In one podcast, Buchmeyer talked about what she was looking for as a summer associate and how Benesch Friedlander met her expectations.

"Some programs are all about wining and dining and not about learning," she said on the podcast. "I was interested in finding a place where I could learn and grow as a young professional. I thought that's what Benesch had to offer, and with the summer almost over now, I still think that about them."

Kevin D. Margolis, chair of Benesch Friedlander's hiring committee, believes the podcasts have made a difference in the kind of students the firm is attracting as summer associates for next year.

"It seems like there's a higher level of interest from a higher level of students," he said. "It's a newer, hipper, lack-of-stuffiness factor. I think a lot of law students find that appealing."

Jennifer Smith, the legal recruiting coordinator at Goulston & Storrs, agreed.

"The feedback from students has been terrific," she said. "They think it's really cool that a law firm has podcasts and that the answers they've gotten from them have been honest."

Listenership numbers reveal interest

The initial response indicates the recruitment podcasts have been a success.

At Goulston & Storrs, "approximately 2,000 podcasts were listened to within the first two weeks of being posted" in mid-August, according to Smith.

At Benesh Friedlander, the recruitment podcasts caused a 50 percent jump in the number of people who listen to the company's podcast program. That program had initially focused exclusively on marketing and was getting 200 hits a week. But when the first recruitment podcast was posted on Aug. 17, the number of hits soared to 310 a week by September.

Pepper Hamilton, a 400-lawyer firm in Philadelphia and 10 other cities, plans to launch its recruitment podcast program later this month. They will be part of a larger commitment by the firm to market itself via a "pod center" that was launched on Oct. 6. The recruitment component will consist of 3-minute testimonials designed to attract law students and lateral hires, according to recruitment director Meg Urbanski.

"This is emanating from the marketing department," said Urbanski, "and we feel that it is enabling us in the recruitment department to really be cutting edge."

Legal marketing consultant Larry Bodine of Glen Ellyn, Ill., said more firms should be using podcasts as a recruitment tool.

"What a realistic way to recruit - have the summer associates do the talking for the firm," he said. "When you hear them, it just sounds incredible. You have an actual associate talking about a scary subject like, 'What happens if I screw up?'"

"This is a brilliant new use of technology," he continued. "You're showing that your law firm is really hip."

Questions or comments can be directed to the writer at: dick.dahl@lawyersusaonline.com

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