

Getting the message across

It pays for law firms to embrace the significant power of advertising, despite the negative experience of Barlow Lyde & Gilbert, says **Ronel Lehmann**, who offers his advice on how to make the best use of a marketing budget

The story behind Barlow Lyde & Gilbert's recent ill-fated advertising campaign, aimed at winning more business for its litigation department, is one that will go down in legal market legend. The firm offended potential and existing clients alike when it ran an advert naming 250 in-house counsel without their consent, suggesting that, in future, they contact the firm for advice.

But the firm's experience should not dissuade other professional services firms considering spending some of their marketing budget on advertisements. Although I have spent nearly 20 years working in public relations (PR), I am a great advocate of advertising; it allows a firm to say exactly what it wants, without anyone changing the message, unlike traditional media relations. It also allows a firm the opportunity to change its perception and make an impact.

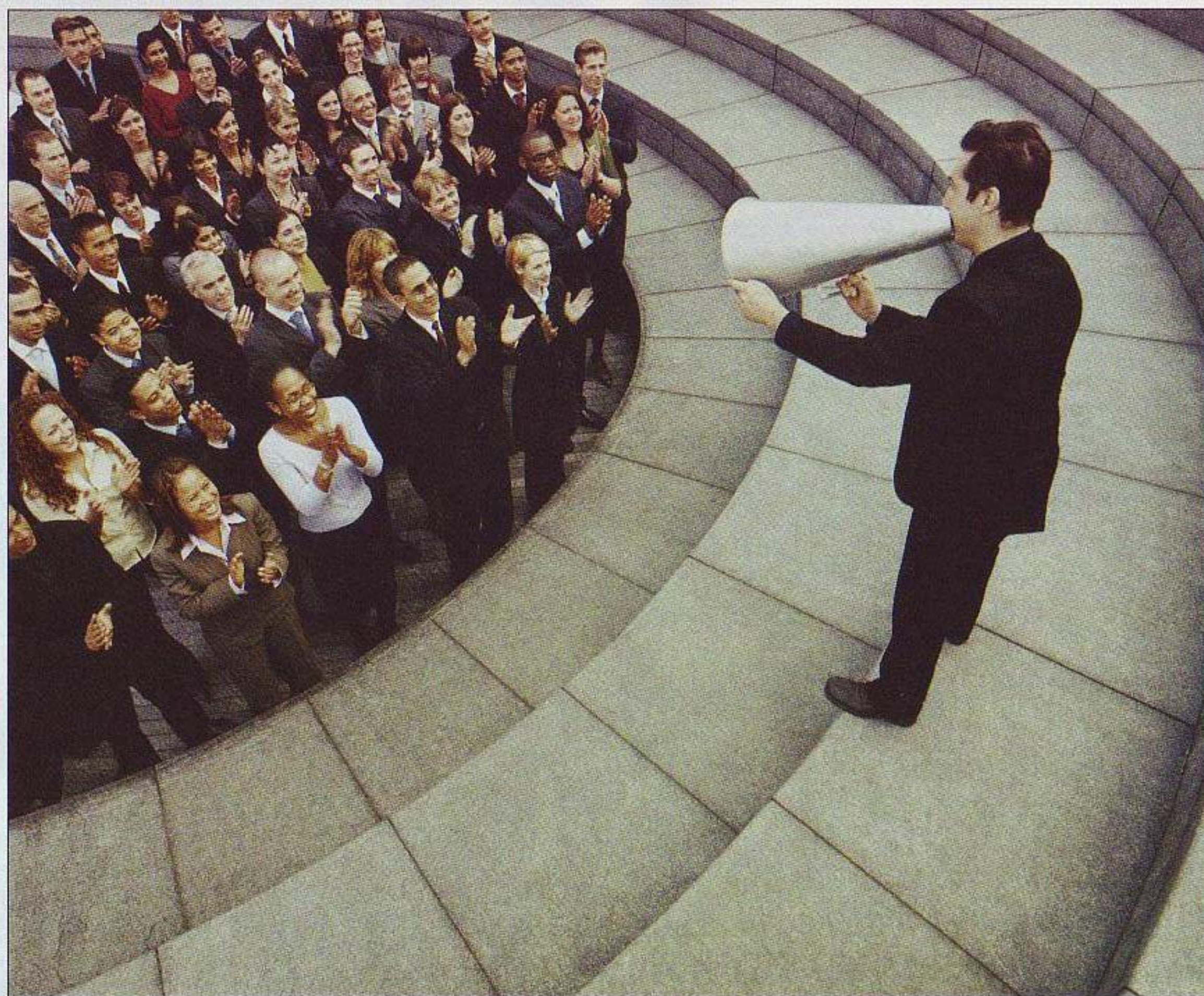
Law firms generally spend their advertising budget on corporate branding, recruitment and directories. I intend to deal with each in turn in this article.

Corporate brand advertising

This is where you expect to make a subliminal impact on a prospective client. You hope to convey a message about your capability that will strike a chord. It can also spearhead strategy and underpin ongoing media interest.

The other great advantage is that you can get people talking about your business. I once advised a professional indemnity mutual targeting chartered and certified accountants, where the product was a professional indemnity insurance cover owned by its members, so that they got a return on their premium at the end of the year if there were not too many claims.

We ran a campaign picturing a tombstone graveyard scene, proclaiming that this defunct chartered accountancy firm had not been insured with the mutual in question. That particular campaign suc-



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ceeded in getting the message across and causing a stir.

The other important benefit of brand-recognition advertising is the contribution it can make when responding to inaccuracies printed elsewhere. In a legal market that is increasingly under scrutiny from the media, there are times when a law firm will receive coverage that it feels incorrectly conveys its message or does not feature the firm in a particularly favourable light. Celebrities are renowned for running advertisements responding to such events and there is no reason why professional services firms cannot, and should not, do the same.

Naturally, it is important the impact of your campaign does not upset the very people you are hoping to impress. High street retailers like Benetton may be able to get away with 'shock and awe' advertisements, but professional services firms need to be more careful.

The secret to success is to show your clients what you are intending to do, as most clients are very happy to share in your success if they feel you have done a good job. You also need to remember that the clients will see your campaign and think that you are spending their money, so it is not always a great idea to spend too much on something flashy.

Hammond Suddards Edge was the recipient of some criticism in 2000 when

it spent about £1m on a marketing campaign in the national press, masterminded by top agency Team Saatchi and aimed at rebranding the firm as a big-league City player. The agency was dropped after only six months and the firm changed its name shortly after.

Two other tips make for a successful advertising campaign. First, do not go over the top. Those who are successful do not need to brag about it and professional services firms need to adhere to that. You do not want your clients to think you are too successful and decide that they may be better suited to a less high-profile firm.

Second, remember that one of the hardest things to deal with in advertising is humour. Everyone wants something in an advert that will make its audience chuckle, but the reality is that that is a difficult thing to get right.

Recruitment campaigns

While a corporate branding campaign is all about making an impact, a recruitment campaign is usually designed to go hand-in-hand with branding when a firm is looking to raise its profile among potential recruits. Frequently, a headhunter will tell a professional services firm that they simply are not known to the candidates they are targeting and will suggest three months of advertising in the media that will be seen by

prospective recruits, so that when the headhunter contacts them, they will be familiar with the firm.

The London office of Weil Gotshal & Manges ran just that kind of campaign when Maurice Allen left with a team of partners to join White & Case in 2000 and it played a significant part in repositioning the office's profile in the minds of new recruits.

I have recently been advising Ronnie Fox on the launch of his new firm, Fox. That is not something that needs advertising in terms of corporate brand because Ronnie is very well known, but he may well consider some sensible recruitment advertising to get his message across when it comes to attracting lateral hires.

Directory advertising

Directory advertising is enormously important because lawyers and barristers jockey for position in the ratings and news of their respective client wins. Plus, there are professional announcements and tombstones, which are normally transaction-related, all of which put further pressure on those marketing coffers.

Law firms should be encouraged to advertise, and PR people, who traditionally see their roles as much more valuable than paid-for advertising, should recognise that both media have their part to play.

While Barlows' experience will have made many people wary, it is important not to forget the successes which have come from advertising as well. DLA Piper, for example, made a huge splash with its campaign in 2003 that targeted general work for large clients, by positioning itself as a down-to-earth alternative to the magic circle with a run of ads in the national press — and look where they are now.

Similarly, one of the most amazing advertising campaigns I have seen was legacy firm Rowe & Maw's sponsorship of an England international football match in 2001. Hoardings displayed 'Rowe & Maw: Lawyers for Business' and it did not cost them a great deal of money. It was a major match, beamed all over the world. Not surprisingly, it was not long after that their US merger suitor Mayer Brown emerged.

Farrer & Co is currently doing a spectacular job of associating itself with British sport through its involvement with the 2012 Olympic campaign.

To sum up, advertising pays. It may not necessarily deliver when you expect, but I know that whenever we have spent money promoting ourselves through advertising we have, at some point, always received a referral, or gained feedback that someone has noticed it.

Advertising has a cumulative effect. Do not let Barlows' story put you off expanding your marketing horizons. ■ Ronel Lehmann is chief executive of Lehmann Communications.