

## **IMAGE OF THE PROFESSION**

### **Background**

Every lawyer already knows the background on this issue. The negative image of the legal profession is a perennial concern of lawyers. Surveys regularly confirm what anyone who watches Jay Leno knows – the legal profession is often the butt of jokes, and lawyers (as a group) are distrusted, in part because the public believes they place their own interest above that of their clients. Compounding this distrust is a shallow understanding of lawyers as advocates and their essential role in our society and system of government. The public dislikes the fact that lawyers represent disreputable and, sometimes, horrible criminals, but acknowledges that the right to an attorney is an important part of our justice system. The public hates when a criminal case is dismissed because a defense attorney found a “loophole or technicality,” but supports the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Surveys show that individuals may have a low opinion of lawyers in general, but have a higher opinion of the lawyer who represents them.

Periodically, the American Bar Association initiates programs to improve the image of lawyers. It has run print ads in several cities conveying the idea that lawyers and the Constitution are like a security blanket, protecting our rights. Other bar associations have addressed this problem in a variety of ways. For instance, The Florida Bar conducted a “Dignity in Law” campaign. They budgeted about \$500,000 to develop their campaign with a public relations firm, and then launched it with a series of editorial board visits and a ceremony at the beginning of a college football game. The Wisconsin Bar developed a “branding program,” which offers lawyers a tag line and images for their advertisements that support a positive image of lawyers. Other state bars have developed print ads that promote a positive image of lawyers by emphasizing the community services lawyers perform, while other ads emphasize the significant impact lawyers have on the lives of those who rely on them. A variety of bar organizations throughout the United States participate in joint programs with their state’s broadcasters’ association to play television and radio spots similar to those that The Missouri Bar produces.

### **Missouri Bar Activities**

Since January 1999, The Missouri Bar has been conveying positive images of lawyers and the legal system through a program offered by the Missouri Broadcasters Association. After conducting a survey about the public’s attitude toward lawyers, a message for the first set of television and radio spots was developed expressing the idea that the legal system works for Missourians and that lawyers are affordable problem solvers. These themes were woven into three television and three radio 30-second messages that were distributed by the Missouri Broadcasters Association to its members. Each year, the president of The Missouri Bar “tweaks” the message a bit to reflect his or her priorities for the year. A public relations firm then develops the ideas for broadcast. For every dollar that the bar provides to the Missouri Broadcasters Association, \$4 worth of airtime is guaranteed. Over the years, the broadcasters have delivered much, much more than a 4 to 1 ratio. The bar’s television and radio spots are played thousands of times each year throughout the state. Unlike public service announcements, the bar’s spots are not played at 3 a.m., but are aired between 6 a.m. and midnight. The greatest strength of this program is that it is incredibly cost-effective. The bar buys \$30,000 worth of airtime and gets hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of play for its investment.

An individual's attitude toward the legal profession is, of course, based on a large number of factors – everything from the dramatic portrayal of lawyers in literature and movies to word of mouth and actual experience with lawyers. Can a bar-developed TV spot change the opinion of someone who has had a negative experience with a lawyer? There's no reason to think this is possible. But can the same 30-second message expose a viewer to another perspective? Yes. In our society, different groups express a wide range of opinions about lawyers. The bar's institutional advertising campaign ensures that the voice of The Missouri Bar is included in this mixture of messages that Missourians receive.

Radio and television spots have an emotional impact, but can convey only a limited (30 seconds) amount of information about the legal system and lawyers. The state bar's *Access* newsletter was developed to address this limitation. This quarterly newsletter provides useful information about the law, lawyers and the legal system. It is a direct channel for conveying the bar's agenda in a manner that relates to the public. Each issue covers topics such as: the lawyer-client relationship; resources available from the bar; new electronic resources on the bar's website; news about our state's court system; and questions and answers about the law. It is mailed to the human resources directors of 4,000 businesses in Missouri that employ 100 or more people, to libraries, to chambers of commerce, to circuit clerks and to several thousand churches. Those receiving the newsletter are encouraged to clip and copy parts of it for their own company newsletters.