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PROFESSIONS: Making the Case for How Humor Helps Law Firms

By Patricia Kitchen

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First we had presidential candidate John McCain cracking a lawyer joke on "The Tonight Show." Now we have a law firm in San Francisco creating and posting to YouTube a lighthearted video about its firm - "The Law Accordion to Hanson Bridgett" - viewed almost 15,000 times since its launch last month. (See inspired.hansonbridgett.com.)

Humor - and the law? It's not an unheard-of pairing to at least one Long Island law firm, Meltzer, Lippe, Goldstein & Breitstone LLP in Mineola, whose Web site displays eight law-related cartoons licensed from The New Yorker magazine.

Have you seen the one that shows a judge admonishing a participant in a court case by telling him, "Apparently you have very little respect for our judicial system, sauntering in here with only one lawyer"? Or another that shows a prospective client saying, "You seem to know something about the law. I like that in a lawyer"?

They're on the firm's site at mlg.com, which is refreshed once a month with five new cartoons, says Cecilia Alers of Alers Consulting in Melville, who two years ago helped the firm revise its branding approach. That's after partners had decided their marketing materials weren't helping the firm stand out from the crowd. You've seen that type of marketing: the four-color brochure with serious-looking people sitting around a serious-looking conference table, says Ira R. Halperin, partner and co-head of the corporate law department.

Alers' first job was to find out the top 10 things people like and don't like about lawyers, which "took me about five minutes," she says. Among the dislikes: overbilling, overstaffing, not understanding the client's business, not returning calls.

To address these issues the firm created lists on its Web site: what "we will do" and "will not do." Under "will not do": "bill you for our learning curve," "send surprise invoices," "be condescending toward you or your staff." And under "will do": "use common sense" and "return phone calls."

Notifying clients each month when new cartoons have been posted, says Alers, is a way for the firm to stay in touch in an entertaining way that doesn't come off as promotional. It's a way, she says, to show that the firm's staff "understood that lawyers were the butt of jokes - in some cases for good reason."