



Building Your Professional Reputation

by Fellows **Soyong Cho**, Senior Vice President and Senior Company Counsel at Wells Fargo & Company; **Leasa Anderson**, Senior Counsel, Huntington Ingalls Industries, Inc.; and **Cassandra Soltis**, Of Counsel at Bayne & Associates

What are some concrete examples of actions you take (daily, weekly, quarterly, annually) to cultivate your professional reputation?

Soyong Cho: I'm not a natural self-promotor and find it uncomfortable to tout my own successes. Instead, I've generally subscribed to the view that a foundational necessity of developing a good professional reputation is being an excellent attorney, which includes both subject matter expertise and the soft skills needed to be an affective advisor and advocate. As you prove yourself as a reliable and trusted counselor, clients will turn to you for their most critical issues, which in turn builds up on and enhances your reputation as you handle increasingly complex and high-risk matters. In some ways, having your reputation shared and cultivated by others who rely on you can be more persuasive and effective. Over my career, this path has been the most compatible with me personally and has been what I have aimed to do. I hope that have I've achieved some measure of success in this way.

Leasa Anderson: I moved to an in-house position last year, so being viewed as a business partner, and not just legal counsel, has been very important. On a weekly basis I attend the staff meetings of company leadership as well all special events such as leadership off-sites and business management workshops. It is essential that I make myself part of the team as opposed to someone only engaged when the business thinks a legal opinion is needed. This provides me with an early look into various business plans and strategies which enables me to advise on issues proactively as opposed to just responsively.

Further, I provide quarterly training on various topics of interest to the business or on topics the Law Department wants to ensure the business is informed of in a timely manner. In addition, on an annual basis, I provide content for the Division newsletter.

Finally, on a daily basis, I make sure that I provide timely responses to the business. This does not mean I'm providing immediate answers, but I am sure to acknowledge receipt of their message and provide a realistic timeline on when I will reply with a substantive response.

Cassandra Soltis: I look at this in two ways: external reputation, and the reputation I cultivate where I work. There is some overlap, of course, and what you do to build each will typically benefit the other.

To strengthen my external professional reputation, I try to volunteer annually for at least one significant project related to the legal profession. I've done this by serving on committees or advisory boards, speaking at conferences, writing articles, being a mentor, and working on pro bono programs. Being involved in this fashion is a great way to make new connections, which can lead to other opportunities down the road. For example, I brought in a new client based on an article I wrote in a trade magazine, and I was made aware of a job opportunity as a result of my work on a pro bono project. You never know what saying yes will lead to.

To cultivate my professional reputation where I work, I stay up-to-date about what's happening in my practice area by reading certain blogs, newsletters, and other materials. I attend CLE courses and seek other ways to improve myself, such as being involved with Toastmasters and reading books about leadership and emotional intelligence. I keep clients and colleagues informed of developments that might impact them, and I try to meet their deadlines but let them know if I can't.

In addition, I make an effort to be approachable and treat colleagues with respect. This might sound basic, but I've seen where this does not happen, and the person gets a bad reputation, despite how great the work is. Incidentally, when I was Director, Corporate Counsel at Starbucks, one of the things I and others admired about then-CEO Howard Schultz was that he would acknowledge people passing him in the hall and sometimes even started a conversation with them. He made all people feel like they mattered, and this positively impacted his reputation at the company.

What are some roadblocks you have encountered while building your reputation? How did you navigate those?

SC: I've certainly had instances where things didn't go as planned. I've made my share of mistakes, but in some cases, these weren't always within my control. For example, when a member of the team drops the ball or an opinion goes against the weight of authority. At the end of the day, I find that acknowledging risks ahead of time to appropriately set expectations with clients and taking accountability when things go sideways (regardless of why) helps to overcome those challenges and serves to build your credibility.

LA: When I initially moved to my current position, the business, while experienced in working with counsel, usually brought me in at the tail end of a matter to review documents and simply "sign off." I have worked diligently to be brought in on matters earlier and earlier so that I can advise on issues that may not have been considered or risks that can be mitigated far earlier in the process.

By not being afraid to speak up, make suggestions, and request to be included in strategy meetings, I am showing the business the benefits of consulting me at the initiation of new

matters. Combined with timely feedback and routine attendance, even at meetings I am not “required” to attend, they have seen that I’m in the trenches with them and not just someone they need a final sign-off from.

CS: I’ve sometimes had people be roadblocks. I think we’ve all encountered our share of difficult people in our networks. In these instances, I talked to mentors, developed alternate relationships, and sought projects to engage on elsewhere.

Are there any strategies you’ve tried for building your reputation that have ultimately backfired?

SC: When I was in private practice, I tried to more aggressively put myself out there and do those things that I thought were the “right” ways to develop business. It was so unnatural for me that it was bound to fail, and it did. I was fortunate to consistently have a steady book of business and genuinely enjoyed firm practice, but I’m much happier practicing in-house and focusing on other measures of success.

LA: Thankfully, I have not had any strategies backfire, but when I was still in private practice I learned that not all outreach was a good use of my time. I had to learn how to use my skill set, and making direct, one-on-one connections was the best way for me to generate new business. I did not find that emails with links to articles or write-ups about recent cases were beneficial. Instead, I’d engage in person and offer a free training session or webinar, and that reaped far more rewards.

CS: I wouldn’t say they backfired, but they simply didn’t work. In some instances, I realized after a while that doing my best and trying to be a thoughtful colleague wasn’t always going to win over certain individuals. Still, I think it’s prudent to err on giving relationships time. However, once you see a potential roadblock, it’s probably a good time to reach out to a mentor and try to develop relationships with others, in case the person you are trying to build your professional reputation with is blind to what you have to offer.

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