



BY HEATHER SUTTIE



Get Smart on Media

Short, succinct and relevant communications are what clients want — not intellectual showboating. They're also the key to separating you from the pack

IF YOU'RE OF a certain vintage, you'll likely remember the show *Get Smart*. This was a comedy that aired in the 1960s and satirized the secret agent genre — think James Bond with a hearty dose of Austin Powers.

What made the show memorable — besides a cast of zany characters that included the bungling Maxwell Smart and his comely female sidekick — was the peculiar method by which Smart received his communiqués. While other spies hid their devices in pens and cigarette cases, Smart housed a telephone in the sole of his shoe.

Agent Smart, as it turns out, was ahead of his time. Not that we communicate with shoes per se, but we're not far off the mark with the devices used today.

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

During January's Legal Marketing Association seminar, "Legal Marketing On-The-Go," one statistic confirmed what we already suspected. According to a 2010 Corporate Counsel New Media Engagement Survey by American Lawyer Media, Greentarget and Zeughauser Group, 74 per cent of counsel aged 30 to 39 prefer receiving client bulletins on smart phones. Which is to say that if your communications can't be read on a BlackBerry, iPhone and iPad, don't bother sending it.

It was also during the '60s that Canadian educator and communication theorist Marshall McLuhan famously coined the phrase "the medium is the message." In a nutshell, this means that the type of medium used influences how the message is perceived.

McLuhan was right then and he's right now. Given all the media available, it's prudent to consider the device and format clients will choose to receive your message — be it handheld, desktop or, heaven forbid, print — and therefore, how that message should be crafted.

WHAT CLIENTS WANT

Mark Twain was an American humourist and writer. When advising other writers, he pressed for clarity, conciseness and pithiness. He said, "The more you explain it, the more I don't understand it."

Twain's advice continues to ring true. Clients want short blurbs that can be read easily on a mobile device. The same goes for information received on a desktop computer.

During an LMA panel discussion last October, a group of in-house counsel were explicit in laying out three types of client communication they want to receive. These, in order of importance, are: (1) a flash bulletin or alert, around 50 words, that is quick off the mark when a decision comes down; (2) bulletins that are enabled for mobile devices with no click-throughs, attachment downloads or scrolling; (3) a follow-up providing a more in-depth summary.

BULLETINS AND TIME-WASTERS

What's the difference? Not much judging by what many firms dish out. The definition of a bulletin is a brief account on a matter of interest issued for immediate publication or broadcast, while a newsletter is a report, sometimes containing analysis, that is issued periodically.

Then there are the time-wasters. We've all seen them. These are the pieces that begin with a case reference and background, rather than starting with salient points and the significance of the case, which tends to show up five paragraphs in.

In journalism, this is known as "burying the lead," and it is a cardinal sin. This was never made clearer to me than when, in 1990, I worked with *The Globe and Mail* to provide broadcast versions of Report on Business stories to radio and television audiences. My job was to pick out the salient points of a print story, which during those times tended to appear in the third or fourth paragraph.

When I asked management there why the leads of their stories appeared so far down the page, they said it was because they, as newspaper editors, took 30 inches to tell a story, while I, as a broadcaster, had to tell it in 30 seconds. My observation, however, did strike a chord with the editors, and not long after, the salient points of stories began appearing nearer the top. This helped readers discern more quickly whether an article was of interest to them so they could choose whether to read it or not — and it certainly made my job easier.

And that, incidentally, is what providing communication to clients is all about. Making it easy for them to take in your information, think about it and act on it. In short, helping them do their job. 📌

Heather Suttie is a legal business development and law marketing consultant. She works with law firms and legal teams and consults to Canada's leading firms — national, mid-size and boutique. Heather can be reached at (416) 964-9607 or heather@heathersuttie.ca.