

PR" Stands for "Profit" at Locke Liddell

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Monday, August 2, 2004

When it's crisis time for a Locke Liddell & Sapp client, the firm provides more than legal advice to help the client solve its predicament. A client also can hire Julie Gilbert, the firm's director of strategic communications, who does everything from writing press releases for clients to coaching corporate executives who are nervous about the imminent arrival of a television camera crew.

Gilbert, a former journalist and former chief spokesperson for the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, says her role in a crisis is to assess a client's situation from a marketing and public image standpoint, and help the client figure out the best way to get through the troubling situation.

Gilbert says she also does routine marketing and public relations work for a number of the firm's clients, along with the more traditional work she does for the firm. The clients either pay a monthly retainer for Gilbert's expertise or are billed at an hourly rate, an arrangement that makes Gilbert a profit center for Locke Liddell and a selling point for lawyers.

"I've found it to be a tremendous selling point," says Locke Liddell partner Robert Miller, head of the firm's public law section. "Clients are looking for one-stop shopping where they can get their legal, lobbying and communications needs met."

"She's brought a whole new dimension to our lobbying practice and much of our litigation management practice," says Bruce LaBoon, a senior partner in Locke Liddell who is a former managing partner. "It's a very good thing for us, a very good investment."

Gilbert's work is helping to put Locke Liddell on the cutting edge in Texas in the marketing arena. While she isn't alone in providing support to clients and charging for it - director of media relations Mark Curriden also does similar work at Houston-based Vinson & Elkins - marketing and public relations people at a number of large firms based in Texas say their work for clients doesn't extend past the occasional review of a press release.

"Every once in a while, when a client doesn't have any PR staff or when they are unavailable, I've thrown something up on the PR newswire for them, or when they were in a pinch, I'd give them some starting advice on crisis management. My first advice is to get a good PR firm," says Petri Darby, public relations and marketing manager for Dallas-based Jenkins & Gilchrist.

"We don't view PR as a profit center," says Leigh Ann Nicas, public relations manager for

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Fulbright & Jaworski of Houston.

But it is at Locke Liddell, where Gilbert says she spends about half of her time on work for clients. Gilbert says she racked up about 75 billable hours in June, for instance, some of it on retainer. Each month, her billables - at \$275 an hour - are in the same range, she says.

Gilbert, a nonlawyer, is part of the firm's public law section and frequently accompanies the attorneys when they pitch [to] clients or participate in beauty contests. "She gives us a capability to have an integrated approach to public policy issues," Miller says.

That opportunity is what made the Locke Liddell job attractive to Gilbert, who worked at METRO from 1995 through April 2002. She joined METRO after the closing of The Houston Post, where she had been editor of the features department.

"What really intrigued me was the strategic part," says Gilbert, who says the job combines her experience in the newspaper business with what she learned about dealing with the press and with politicians while working at METRO.

Gilbert's job at METRO actually helped direct her to Locke Liddell. Miller is a former chairman of METRO, and he sold Gilbert and other partners in Locke Liddell on the concept of having Gilbert join the firm. Miller says his work at METRO led him to see the convergence between PR and public policy law, and as head of the firm's public law section, he figured having Gilbert on board at the firm would help the section. That concept - the melding of PR and public policy law - made it easy to convince Locke Liddell's management committee to hire Gilbert, Miller says.

Gilbert says her first client assignment came one day after she joined Locke Liddell in April 2002. A firm client had just closed a deal to acquire another company, and because she, by coincidence, knew an executive at the client company, he talked to her about writing a press release announcing the deal. Gilbert says he didn't care that the firm would charge for her work. Her foray into work for clients took off from that first press release.

While Gilbert writes press releases, helps clients with internal newsletters and jumps in to manage a crisis, she is not directly involved in lobbying either in Austin or Washington, D.C. But if a client had a matter pending before the Texas Legislature, she says, she might monitor news coverage of the issue, help executives craft message points, ghostwrite op-ed pieces or set up meetings with newspaper editorial boards.

Sometimes Gilbert is a spokesperson for a client and other times she operates behind the scenes.

Wendy Haig, executive vice president of SimDesk Technologies Inc., a Houston company that has a contract with the city of Houston to provide residents with free software and Internet access at public libraries, says she talks to Gilbert on a daily basis.

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"I have come to rely very heavily on her thoughts and her opinions and that has happened as a result of proven successes," says Haig, who is based in Washington.

Haig says SimDesk hired Locke Liddell and put Gilbert on a retainer around the end of 2002, which was after the Houston City Council approved a \$9.5 million contract with SimDesk. The deal became controversial after then-Councilman Bruce Tatro raised questions about how the contract was bid. The Houston City Council ultimately ratified the contract, but the deal received negative publicity after the city information technology official who recommended the contract was indicted on theft charges unrelated to his work for the city. In 2003, J. Dennis Piper pleaded guilty to stealing nearly \$300,000 in 1999 from Houston's Reliant Energy, where he worked prior to his employment as information technology officer for the city of Houston. His plea deal called for 10 years of probation and restitution.

Haig says Gilbert's first advice was to be open, forthright and truthful, and to boil that down into "very succinct sound bites" to get attention from political figures and reporters in Houston.

Tatro, who now works for Harris County Tax Assessor Paul Bettencourt, says he knew of Gilbert from her METRO days and knew she had joined Locke Liddell, but did not know she was giving advice to SimDesk officials.

"She has certainly helped us with PR advice and planning, and she has helped us understand the political structure in the way public policy is formed within the government in the city of Houston," Haig says.

While Gilbert knows the ropes in Texas, Haig says she also relies on Gilbert for advice about how to sell the company's software in other markets.

Haig says Gilbert is skilled at looking at the political situation and devising a strategy.

"She's very successful in mitigating a crisis. She prepares us for the best and the worst, no matter where it is I'm soliciting her advice," Haig says.

Gilbert writes internal communications for Locke Liddell client Texas BOMA, the Texas Building Owners and Managers Association Inc. Bill Carey, the group's president, says the trade group hired Locke Liddell in March after determining that the firm was the only one offering someone who could write pieces for the membership explaining laws and regulations and procedures, and could write op-ed articles that could be sent to outside publications.

"We definitely see it as a benefit," Carey says.

Before the group hired Locke Liddell, volunteers would do the writing. It's a much speedier process with Gilbert on board, Carey says.

"What we have found with Locke Liddell is we talk about it and a couple of days later, it's done -

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or you get it on the e-mail before you finish the conference call," he says.

Other Locke Liddell clients Gilbert does work for include the Houston Community College System. Chancellor Bruce Leslie says Gilbert helps with advice and recommendations for responding to questions about public issues. HCC has her on retainer, he says.

"She adds some very important additional value to how we ought to consider the strategies we are trying to use," Leslie says.

Catching On?

At V&E, Curriden, a former reporter at The Dallas Morning News, says that over the past year he's done billable work for about 10 of the firm's litigation clients. He says he gets involved at the request of the firm's trial lawyers, and the clients, which he declines to name, are in court for environmental litigation, or on antitrust, health-care or products liability suits. He says he works with the lawyers and the client in developing a public response if the client is a defendant, or developing a message if the client is the plaintiff. Curriden declines to say what V&E charges clients for his work, or what the firm charged clients for similar work done by his predecessor, Joe Householder.

Householder, now spokesman for U.S. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., did work for V&E client Bridgestone/Firestone in connection with high-profile tread-separation litigation. Householder says he also did a small amount of work for defendants in litigation filed over the diet drug duo fen-phen, and some work for some public policy clients of the firm.

"It's a challenging business to build for firms," Householder says. "You've got to convince them [clients] that the benefit is there."

Curriden says that he hasn't written press releases for clients, but has reviewed some.

Reviewing press releases is the extent of the work done by several other marketing and PR people at other large Texas firms.

Kristen J. White, D.C.-based communications manager at Dallas firm Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, says she's never billed clients for PR work, but has on rare occasions helped a couple put a press release on the PR newswire. Similarly, Michelle Miller, communications manager at Houston-based Andrews Kurth, says she has written press releases for clients a couple times over the last year, but "just as a favor."

Howard Ayers, managing partner of Andrews Kurth, says it's never occurred to him to have in-house marketing people do billable work for clients. "We haven't thought about that and haven't thought through whether it's a good or bad idea," he says.

At Fulbright, Nicas, the public relations manager, says the firm has billed for PR services, but

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only under unique circumstances, such as instances when the firm provides PR along with litigation support.

"We have helped when they don't have in-house PR assistance. [We] help them issue press releases, help them connect with reporters [and] help them find PR counsel," she says.

Joey Mooring, public relations manager at Dallas' Winstead Sechrest & Minick, says he's never billed a client for PR service, but he on occasion has given clients some advice or looked over a press release for them.

While Darby, the public relations and marketing manager at Jenkens, doesn't do billable work for clients, he sees potential for firms to provide PR, marketing and crisis management services to clients. But for that service to become widespread, Darby suggests firms will need to view marketing people as strategists instead of tacticians.

"I would never say never, because I think law firms by their nature are somewhat opportunistic at looking at ways to expand services, but if we go into that area, we would do it very, very carefully," says Thomas Cantrill, chairman of Jenkens. "What we are trained to do is provide legal services."

Deborah McMurray, a Dallas-based marketing consultant for firms, is surprised more firms aren't doing what Locke Liddell does. McMurray, of McMurray & Associates, says she billed clients for PR, marketing and crisis management work when she worked at the now-defunct Dallas firm Johnson & Gibbs - and that was back in 1989 and 1990.

McMurray says she also did it around 1995 at Hughes & Luce, another Dallas firm. It's smart for the firms to develop that internally, she says.

"I'm surprised that more aren't doing it," she says. "I don't really know why that is. I think some firms are conservative who think the marketing department is just a support function for the business of that law firm and they don't see how it can really transform into . . . stronger client relationships."

She's not worried about losing business if firms ramp up their PR and marketing to clients.

"It would be competitive, but the more a law firm can [do to] solve a multidisciplinary problem for a client, the better," McMurray says. "So I think it's much smarter . . . if they have the capability to do it internally than to hire outside."

It's innovative, says Houston firm consultant William Cobb.

"It's a great idea because I'm [the firm is] now stepping outside the box from providing legal service to I'm solving problems," he says.

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But Peter Zeughauser, a firm consultant in Newport Beach, Calif., says it's not much of a trend currently because few firms have the capacity to do it.

"I don't think you can make as much money at that as with a good law practice, so in the end, I'm not so sure how important that is," Zeughauser says. "I don't think it's a (bad idea, but you are not going to see law firms flocking to that."