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## Getting Law Firms to Like Commercials

**By MARIA ASPAN**

TELEVISION advertising has long been frowned on in the legal profession, as it can conjure images of ambulance-chasing personal injury lawyers and, in some cases, can run afoul of state laws. But a new partnership between a prominent legal directory and an Internet-based advertising agency is trying to overcome these negatives.

LexisNexis Martindale-Hubbell, which publishes a directory of lawyers and their credentials, announced a deal in late May to work with Spot Runner, an online service that helps small businesses advertise on television. Spot Runner, which is based in Los Angeles, will help law firms produce inexpensive television commercials that can run in local markets.

Although the Spot Runner Web site currently offers a general library of off-the-shelf commercials for legal services (among many other industries), the agency is creating new ads specifically for Martindale-Hubbell clients. These commercials, which will not be available in the general library, cover areas like family law, drunken driving, personal injury and general practice; commercials for criminal and immigration law are also being developed.

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While the commercials in Spot Runner's general catalog can be purchased and personalized for as little as \$499, packaged advertising campaigns for Martindale-Hubbell's firms will start from \$10,000 to \$50,000, including air time. Kurt Weinsheimer, vice president for partner development at Spot Runner, said that many small firms had been discouraged from television advertising because professional-looking commercials are prohibitively expensive and time-consuming. Under the new arrangement, law firms can work with their Martindale-Hubbell account representatives to use a Spot Runner ad and buy time in the more-affordable local, rather than the national, television markets. In those local markets, the commercials will run on broadcast and cable networks like CBS, CNN, ESPN and Fox News.

"The law firms that we're targeting are smaller, more local firms in general," Mr. Weinsheimer said. "The most important thing is the message to their communities."

Among these firms, he said, "Very few have used television in the past, so we saw that as a great opportunity."

Spot Runner has been successful with this model in the real estate market, allowing agents at national companies like Coldwell Banker and Century 21 to adapt commercials for use on local cable networks. The ad agency also worked with Warner Independent Pictures, a division of Time Warner, to create film

commercials that ended by referring viewers to their local movie theaters.

“One of the key strengths of Spot Runner is their personal creative,” said Nicholas Karrat, the senior director of marketing and alliances for Martindale-Hubbell. “It looks like it’s done on a national level and at a very high price point.”

The television commercials, which have been in beta testing, are slowly being rolled out state by state; Mr. Karrat said Michigan would be one of the first states, a choice based on market demand. He said that despite some initial skepticism, all doubts were dispelled once the lawyers saw the final commercials. “That’s been the ‘wow’ moment,” he said.

“Law firms still spend a majority of their marketing dollars in printed yellow pages,” Mr. Karrat said. The new partnership, he added, reflected that the firms are increasingly “looking for alternate marketing channels.”

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Even with costs reduced, the larger hurdles may be the public perception of most lawyers’ commercials, as well as various state restrictions on advertising by lawyers. The United States Supreme Court ruled 30 years ago that lawyers were allowed free speech, but many lawyers remain skittish.

Some states, including New York and New Jersey, have tight restrictions on all forms of legal advertising. In February, new rules went into effect in New York that prevent lawyers from using actors without identifying them as such, endorsements from current clients or attention-grabbing images or slogans in any advertising. Mr. Karrat said that Martindale-Hubbell would not initially reach out to firms that are based in New York and some other states because of those restrictions.

Powerful personal-injury law firms like Jacoby & Meyers have, meanwhile, set a precedent for aggressive commercials that may make lawyers at white-shoe firms want to wince.

“Lawyers will have challenges overcoming negative stereotypes in television ads,” said Burkey Belser, president of Greenfield/Belser, a brand-design agency, adding that he did not expect larger corporate law firms to embrace television anytime soon.

“I think it’ll certainly be interesting if we move away from plaintiffs’ firms towards ads that are really about other types of legal services for individuals,” like family law and estate planning, Mr. Belser said.

According to Kim A. Perret, the immediate past president of the Legal Marketing Association and the chief marketing officer for the law firm Sutherland Asbill & Brennan, plaintiff-oriented firms are most likely to use television and radio spots, and billboards.

“Because their clientele is mostly individuals, that is probably the most effective way for them to reach a mass audience,” Ms. Perret said, adding that the same might be true for the smaller firms that Spot Runner and Martindale-Hubbell are courting.

But other types of law firms have to consider what she called “the image issue” when contemplating television commercials. “I think that you’d have to overcome some prejudice that it’s unseemly,” Ms. Perret

said.

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Despite the strikes against it, advertising within the legal services industry generated more than \$575 million in 2006, according to Nielsen Monitor-Plus. But the top 10 spenders are all personal-injury or plaintiff-related law firms like Jacoby & Meyers and James Sokolove, which came in at No. 1 with more than \$25 million spent on advertising last year.

Among most other law firms, advertising is treated like a delicate necessity. According to Ms. Perret, national firms rely on print advertising in trade and business publications, as well as newspapers, to build name awareness (though more adventurous firms might dare to sponsor a segment on National Public Radio.)

And while online marketing has a niche for lawyers, it is small: Nielsen//NetRatings measured about \$2 million spent on Web advertising in the legal services industry last year.

Martindale-Hubbell has long offered Web and print advertising opportunities to law firms, but this is its first foray into television. Mr. Karrat said that he was “not at all concerned” by potential associations with unsavory personal-injury ads.

“Being a conservative company, we’re going to take a conservative approach,” he said.

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