

Law firms take conferences, events route to build brand

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MUMBAI: Cyril Shroff, Zia Mody and Nisith Desai are big names in India's legal profession. They are among the most-in-demand corporate lawyers in the country for their experience, expertise as well as their image.

Branding has become crucial for law firms competing in a marketplace where cross-country takeovers, mergers and copyright disputes are commonplace.

They are using international conferences, legal events, awards and even newspaper columns to build their brands because lawyers are barred from advertising marketing in India. "There is a very thin line between branding and advertising," says Hitesh Jain, partner at ALMT Legal. "In this scenario, it becomes very crucial to take decisions very carefully so that the regulations are not violated."

The Bar Council of India, which governs the professional ethics and practice of a lawyer in the country, restricts legal professionals from any activity that can lead to, either directly or indirectly, market themselves. Yet, it's important to build the brand when a lot of international companies are entering the country.

Hitesh Jain, partner at corporate law firm ALMT Legal, was approached by Khazar University after they read an article about him representing St Martinus University in a case regarding its offshore campus in India.

"We as a profession are moving from personality-based image to brand-based firms," says Suhail Nathani, partner at Economic Laws Practice, a corporate law firm. "International clients from other countries do not know the who's who of the profession but recognise the strength of the brand," he adds. Cyril and Shardul Shroff, for example, lead the 43-partner Amarchand & Mangaldas & Suresh A Shroff & Co, while Zia Mody teamed up with Ajay Bahl and Behram Vakil to float AZB & Partners, which has 20 partners. These are the two best-known law firms in the country, followed by J Sagar Associates, Khaitan & Co, Luthra & Luthra and others.

Most of these firms use conferences and legal events as a favoured route of brand building, says Juhi Garg, India partner of Edge International, a global consultancy to law firms. Nishith Desai, founder partner of Nishith Desai Associates, was in Hong Kong last week to speak on 'Legal and Tax Issues in Inbound and Outbound Mergers and Acquisitions'. The audience included in-house lawyers of Hong Kong's major companies.

Zia Mody often gives speeches on corporate governance. "People seriously listen when someone knowledgeable is discussing important issues and even reverts for further advice on aspects concerning their own firms or businesses after conferences and events," says she.

Abhishek Khare, partner at Khare Legal Chambers, says advertising would give undue advantage to the big players and prove anti-competitive by hampering incumbent lawyers and firms. But he believes that lawyers should be permitted to solicit work from potential clients and make presentations, brochures and informational supplements.

The Bar Council has always been conservative, though. Only recently did it allow law firms to create websites where they can highlight qualifications of the partners, their specialisation and contact details. Besides attending conferences, writing columns and articles is also popular among top lawyers, says Juhi Garg of Edge International.

There are legal advisory firms and websites such as RSG India, LegallyIndia, Legal 500, Mergermarket, and HG that provide rankings and short profiles of top law firms. These firms and websites highlight expertise of the firms, the projects and deals they work on, their ranking in India and internationally and also internal developments such as hiring new partners.

Some lawyers, however, feel that there is no such thing as branding for the legal profession.

“We do not run business houses, which need branding for their products,” says Vikram Trivedi, managing partner at Manilal Kher Ambalal & Co. “In our profession, everything depends on merits and only clients matter.”

There is consensus that the most important resource for a law firm is its work and people.

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