Legal bigwigs wear funny hat to attract talent

Firms are producing videos and fancy websites to shed their staid image

By MICHELLE QUAH
[SINGAPORE] Law firms around the world are finding innovative and amusing ways to attract new hires, challenging traditional notions that legal firms are staid and dull.

And, just to prove that they are in sync with the times, many of these firms are turning to such vehicles as YouTube, a video-sharing website, to spread the word to law students that legal work is fun and humorous, as well as serious and important.

Law firms in the United States have taken to producing videos which aim to persuade students that their lawyers, and by extension the firms, are young-thinking and hip, the New York Times has reported.

These efforts ranged from simple conversations with summer associates to videos promoting a firm's expertise or its diversity.

Here in Singapore, one prominent law firm has also recognised the effectiveness of such a means of reaching out to undergraduates.

A music video by Drew & Napier, set to the tune of Blink 182's All The Small Things, featured several of its first-year associates showing what life is like at the firm.

It was first shown to freshmen law students at Singapore Management University (SMU) at a welcome tea organised by the Law School there. It has since proved such a hit that the video has been featured on numerous blogs and has become a much-viewed fixture on YouTube (under the title "All The Law Things").

The video lampoons the tedium and hard work that fresh hires are typically exposed to, sending the message that law firms do have a sense of humour.

It was scripted, performed and edited by Drew & Napier's first-year associates. One of them, Tan Ijin, the director of the video, said: "We figured that our firm's first-year associates can better relate to the first year SMU law students. We are all new kids on the block."

The project was the brainchild of Drew & Napier director Adrian Tan - who, besides being a hot-shot lawyer, is also known to many as the author of the wildly popular local works, The Teenage Textbook and The Teenage Workbook.

"Our first-year associates were a great choice as they are full of spirit and creativity. Plus their time costs are lower," he quipped.

Still, he pointed out that the video was not meant as a recruitment tool. "It was definitely not meant to have anything to do with recruitment. But anyone who wants to join our firm should know that our lawyers are a very lively bunch. Our distinctive corporate culture is there for all to see," he told BT.

The practice of showcasing a kinder, gentler law firm is also one that is taking off elsewhere in the world.

The New York Times reported that several firms in the US have produced recruiting videos and websites with the look and feel of YouTube, in the hopes of attracting law students as summer associates. The need to attract top-notch summer associates is crucial; they are the pool from which most new hires are made. More than 19,000 graduates join law firms in the United States each year.

For example, Choate Hall & Stewart - a Boston firm with about 200 lawyers and more than 100 years of history - has developed a series inspired by Apple's "Mac vs PC" advertisements. The videos cost the firm US$75,000.

And at Sullivan & Cromwell's website, there are 16 videos featuring conversations between lawyers - in an attempt to reach out to students in a more personable way.

But not all such efforts succeed. There have also been complaints that such lighthearted attempts are "contrived", NYT reported.