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^Bar Tells Lawyers to be Teddy Bears, Not Sharks(

^AP Photo NY307 of March 6(

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ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — Forked tongues, sharp suits, slippery ethics.

That image of lawyers is presented on primetime television, talked about in marathon media trials and ingrained in the nation's psyche. Lawyers are looked upon as shysters, sharpies, greedheads and cut-throats. What's a poor lawyer to do?

In New York state and across the country, bar associations are trying to deflate the shark image by asking lawyers to act more like teddy bears — smile, listen, tell the truth and say "thank you." At the same time, they're waging media campaigns to fight what they consider to be a bum rap.

"They're coming to grips with the fact that maybe there's a public relations problem," said Douglas O'Brien of the New York State Bar Association Task Force on the Profession. "We have a lousy reputation because consumers believe we are treating them shabbily."

It's nothing new. Lawyers have been bashed at least since the invention of the billable hour. Curses against them were found with the remains of King Herod's palace. Shakespeare, in "Henry IV," penned the enduring applause line "the first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers."

But their image has lately gone even farther south. One recent survey commissioned by the American Bar Association found respondents felt lawyers were "greedy ... money hungry." Popular beer commercials show lawyers being roped like bulls at a rodeo. Television dramas present some members of the bar as little more than morally corrupt fashion plates.

"'L.A. Law' is unrealistic because if you watch it carefully, you'll see they go home when it's still light outside," joked New York City lawyer Lawrence Savell. "They have too much hair ... lawyers I know always are pale and have high foreheads."

Meanwhile, some lawyers fear gavel-to-gavel television coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial could hurt them more if their colleagues come off as histrionic or obstructionist.

What to do? The New York State Bar Association just released a report that concedes part of the problem is that some lawyers are rude or just never learned to deal with clients. So, they're offering some Miss Manners-style pointers:

—Greet clients promptly and courteously, offering a sincere smile and a firm handshake.

—Listen carefully to what clients have to say.

—Remember, you're not just a lawyer, you're a person.

Please only what can and will, in fact, be delivered.

Never lie. About anything. At anytime.

Decease no one.

Task force chairman Haliburton Fales said continuing education for attorneys also is recommended because of changes in the practice of law. In the old days, young lawyers would be taught how to deal with clients by a mentor at their firm, but more lawyers than ever these day hang their shingle right out of law school, he said.

Lawyers in New York and other states also are being encouraged to become more open to the media. That could counter the ambulance-chasing image some lawyers present when hawking their services on TV commercials.

"The advertising you see, 'If you tripped and fell, come to us. We will make you whole.' That sort of thing seems to upset a fair number of people," Fales said.

In Pennsylvania, state laws have been passed restricting claims lawyers can make on commercials. It's part of an aggressive image polishing campaign by the Pennsylvania bar. After a fatal jetliner crash last year, the bar publicly asked grieving relatives NOT to call a lawyer immediately.

Some 30 other state bar associations have begun similar programs, including California, which has "good conduct" schools for lawyers. Texas has a "Lawyer's Creed," which discourages obnoxious behavior in court such as "allusions to personal peculiarities or idiosyncrasies of opposing counsel."

The American Bar Association offers an educational video to local bar chapters, giving tips on client protocol how not to come off as a courtroom Rambo. Allan Tanenbaum of the ABA says the effort appears to be working.

"I don't go to bed at night with Jay Leno using lawyers as a whipping post anymore," the Atlanta lawyer said.

In New York, the state bar has already adopted proposals asking lawyers to be kinder and gentler to clients. The bar's House of Delegates, which sets policy for the group, is to deal with some more sticky disciplinary issues when it meets in April.

New York City lawyer Barry Slotnick — who has taken his fair share of criticism defending clients such as subway gunman Bernhard Goetz — greeted the effort. But he noted some image problems seem unresolvable.

"I think the real problem lies not with lawyers' etiquette. I think the real problem is that lawyers are expensive and no one likes to pay them," Slotnick said. "I need not say thank you and please, I need to come in and say 'I just won my last case.'"