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Band of Rebels

ABA Journal's staff went on a road trip to give its members an amped-up publication and help its parent association meet its mission at the same time. 24

an amped-up magazine

ABA Journal set the bar high when it launched a project that put staffers on the road and required new skills in print and online. In the process, it learned plenty about collaboration and how to help its parent association meet its mission.

By Mark Athitakis

By 10 o'clock at night, Edward Adams figured he was finally getting the hang of things.

Adams, the publisher and editor of *ABA Journal*, had brought two of his staffers and a videographer to the East Coast to work in real time for two weeks on a series of features about innovators in the legal profession. Doing that right, Adams figured, required his staff do some innovating as well, so he committed his team to learn as much as they could about video, audio, and social media tools in a few short months. Every story they published would have a multimedia element, no exceptions.

Leading by example, Adams was in a hotel room outside New Haven, Connecticut, in mid-September, spending a long night editing a video interview. He was finally wrapped up and ready to upload it to YouTube when a message appeared on the screen: The site would be down for maintenance indefinitely. They had to be back on the road at 7 a.m. and do it all again, so heading to bed and taking care of it in the morning wasn't an option; Adams stayed up till 3 a.m., when YouTube came back online. "When you rely on free technology, you're at their whims," he says.

That was just one of many lessons he and the *ABA Journal* team learned as they worked on the year-long "Legal Rebels" project in 2009. The magazine published 50 profiles in print and online, hosted numerous online chats, hit the road for two weeks, and cut slideshows, videos, and podcasts. The experience was full of site crashes, balky webcams, WiFi dropouts, steep learning curves, and crushing deadlines, but the project was a financial winner for the magazine. Just as important, the magazine staff received a crash course on collaborative learning, and the image of the larger American Bar Association, which publishes the magazine, got an update that's firmly planted it in the 21st century.



PHOTOGRAPH BY TODD WINTERS



ABA Journal's Legal Rebels team, from left to right: Molly McDonough, Rachel M. Zahorsky, Edward Adams, Stephanie Francis Ward, and Reginald Davis.

“We’re talking about how the profession is changing,” says Adams, explaining his motivation for the project. “What better way to demonstrate a journey than to go on a journey ourselves?”

Time for a Change

By early last year, *ABA Journal* was in some ways an association magazine in little need of radical retooling. Reaching ABA’s more than 375,000 members, it had a long history and a built-in audience with the demographics advertisers crave. It was no slouch online either. Since joining the magazine in 2006, Adams had beefed up the website (www.abajournal.com) and assigned online-only staffers to feed it.

What the magazine didn’t have in January 2009 was a clear, consistent response to the recession that was affecting the legal profession or a full-on engagement with Web 2.0 tools that their readers were using in greater numbers. So when Adams developed the “Legal Rebels” concept, he wanted both content and presentation that reflected the times.

“We didn’t want readers to just be passive recipients of information—we wanted readers to be active participants in the project,” says Adams. “It’s not just that we’re preaching to you about what we discovered in our reporting, but we’re involving you in the process.”

To that end, Legal Rebels had its own online home (www.legalrebels.com) that emphasized ways that readers could participate, pointing to the magazine’s Facebook page, a dedicated Twitter feed (@legalrebels), and a wiki-enabled “manifesto” that readers were encouraged to edit and sign. By year’s end it was edited more than 60 times and attracted more than 200 signatories.

Before all that went live last summer, the ambition and scope of the project initially caught some *ABA Journal* staffers off guard. “When [Adams] said, ‘And then we get a van ...,’ I kinda lost it,” says Online Assistant Managing Editor Molly McDonough, laughing. “It was hard for me to imagine how we were going to

accomplish all that.” But she also saw the opportunity to expand what the magazine was already doing online, as well as offer an institutional response to the economic downturn. “We had been writing and reporting on layoffs and turmoil in the industry, and this was a way to report on change in a positive, exciting way.”

For Rachel M. Zahorsky, a legal affairs writer who was one of two staffers reporting the bulk of the Legal Rebels profiles, the project was a way to apply some of the skills she picked up as a recent graduate Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism. “Multimedia was such a part of my education,” she says. “And being able to say, ‘Oh my gosh, we’re going to do photo slideshows, and we’re going to do audio, and we’re going to do our own video’—it was just really exciting.”

The benefits weren’t just technological. Reginald Davis, Zahorsky’s editor, notes that immersing the young reporter in a big project helped her get familiar with the magazine and got him more in tune with trends that lawyers were dealing with. “It gave me a chance to work more with her and help both of us get even more up to speed on what’s going on in the law and the changes going on there,” he says.

Hitting the Road

ABA Journal has 28 editorial, art, and production staffers, which made it especially well equipped for an association magazine to tackle issues unique to Legal Rebels. It could afford to hire a consultant from the Society of Professional Journalists to provide a one-day course on how to record and edit video and audio, as well as a videographer for the road trip. It also benefited from a strong relationship with advertisers: For the two-week road trip in September, the hotel rooms, SUV rental, cell phones, and WiFi connectivity were all covered by sponsors, in exchange for prominent placement in the magazine and on the website, such as mentions in the videos. Adams estimates the cost of the project at approximately \$20,000 and says nearly all of it was covered by sponsors.

But many of the tools *ABA Journal* used to get job done are well within the reach of small-staff associations. Instead of expensive recording tools for podcast interviews, McDonough opted for AccuConference, a phone recording service that delivered interviews as MP3 files; edits were done with the free tool Audacity. Slideshows were done with SlideShare, also free. Video hosting was

REBEL LESSONS

The Legal Rebels project consumed nearly a year of *ABA Journal*’s staff time, from its concept meetings in January 2009 until the final profiles appeared in the magazine’s December issue. But even if you don’t have the staff to undertake such a big project, Adams says three rules hold true for similar exercises.

- 1. Plan as much as possible...** Legal Rebels didn’t launch until July, but planning began months before. “The minute you think you’ve done all the planning that’s necessary, do some more,” he says. “Something like this has a million moving parts and needs as much attention upfront as possible.”
- 2. ... But learn to be flexible.** A benefit of training on multiple tools is that you know other options that are available when one (inevitably) goes haywire. After the YouTube incident, Adams says, “We created a number of plan Bs and plan Cs.”
- 3. Recognize your community and directly appeal to it.** “Readers want to participate with you,” says Adams. “They want to be part of the conversation. They want to generate content. They want to ask questions. They want to interact with people who are in the news, and association publications, in print or online, can help their audience do that.”

done on YouTube, with all its attendant down-for-maintenance frustrations.

Stephanie Francis Ward, a longtime *ABA Journal* staffer who worked on 18 of the Legal Rebels profiles, had never worked with multimedia before last year. She attended the training session, but says that when it came to putting together audio slideshows, she learned much more from digging in herself, collaborating with Zahorsky. "Once I got my hands into the software that we'd be given ... I thought, this is amazing," she says. "Fun. It almost felt like it was an arts-and-crafts project. Maybe it wouldn't work out perfect, but at least you tried."

Adams, McDonough, and Zahorsky, along with videographer John McQuiston, began their road trip September 14 in Boston and finished in Washington, DC, two weeks later. Each day brought a new profile of a

designated "rebel" that included some kind of web-only element, often a video interview. Generally, whichever reporter worked on a story was responsible for working on the online elements, but the team learned quickly that the process was smoother when they had opportunities to collaborate.

"Our first two hotels, we would all go back to our rooms, work on our separate spots, get everything done, and then meet up for dinner," says McDonough. "But in New York we had a working suite, which is something we hope to replicate with projects back at the office. It was really good to be all in the same room in a shared workspace. We became much more efficient and shared jobs. Whatever needed to get done, we were much more efficient and got our work done more quickly."

"In no way was it, 'this is your job, and this is your job, and this is your

job,'" says Zahorsky. "And that was really important on the tour. Sometimes rendering the video took a really long time, so somebody else would work on the slideshow, or somebody else would upload photos. I think getting us all involved in different aspects was absolutely key to getting this done."

Whatever anxiety the staffers had with the multimedia tools had largely evaporated by the time the team returned to Chicago. "The best way to learn how to do something is simply to do it," says Adams. "Try it out and experience it, and get better at it all the time."

Back at Home

Just as important as the road team clearing the learning curve was being able to pass its new skill sets on to colleagues. "This was a great opportunity to get my feet wet in all of those things,"

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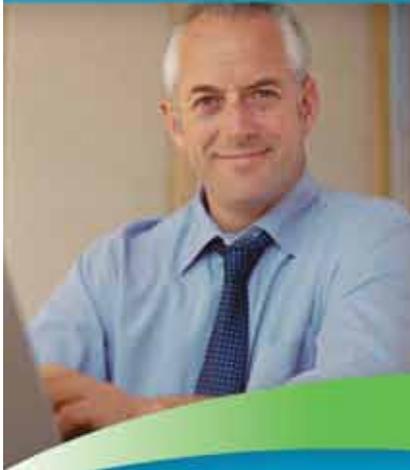
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“The best way to learn how to do something is simply to do it. Try it out and experience it, and get better at it all the time.” —Edward Adams

says Davis. “I would not say that I am the most thrilling audio editor or photo editor, but with some help from other people here in the office, I think we did pretty well.”

And as intended, the project freshened the magazine’s source base. Many of the “rebels” were people who had a strong online presence, such as legal blogger David Lat and Rex Gradless, a recent law school graduate who’s also a fierce Twitter evangelist for lawyers. (Fittingly, Ward interviewed him via Twitter.) But the series also had its share of quirkiness, like the man who sold legal advice out of his coffee shop or the Australian lawyer who placed his firm on the stock market. “I’ve been covering lawyers for almost 20 years, and it was nice to talk to a number of people I haven’t spoken with before and talk about new ideas with them,” says Ward.

The numbers point to a success for the magazine: According to Adams, the Legal Rebels site received 225,000 page views in four months, its videos were viewed more than 6,000 times, and the stories inspired more than 2,000 tweets. The project was especially busy in mid-October, when it posted a new essay and interview every hour across two days for its “24 Hours of Rebels” project. Adams declines to disclose precise figures, but says the magazine received six figures in revenues unique to Legal Rebels—and now has a franchise that the magazine can sell to in 2010.

Legal Rebels also attracted a few “haters” within and outside the site, questioning the magazine’s approach and its definition of “rebel.” (One

blogger wrote that the project served “the ripped jeans, flip-flop, Starbucks mocha frappuccino crowd that leaves the office by 5 even if the brief is due in the morning.”) Adams says the complaints only prove he did his job right. “I think that membership organizations, by their very nature, are consensus driven, and this is clearly a project that’s more cutting edge,” he says. And changing the perception of the magazine can radiate outward to the larger association. “I’m sure a lot of associations are in a situation where people think of it as yesterday’s organization. ‘Yeah, my mentor belonged to that. What’s in it for me? How is it dealing with what’s relevant today?’ When you cover a topic this way, people will think of the larger organization differently—not just the publication, but the organization as a whole, and we saw that throughout this project.”

“There was a Twitter message early in the project from one of our readers,” he adds. “It read, ‘I’m having a hard time putting the words “ABA” and “rebel” in the same sentence. But I’m getting used to it.’” **an**

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