



1-800 ADVOCACY

Vanity Phone Numbers Make Your Firm Less Forgettable

BY LAURA HODES

Sometimes it takes more than a clever advertisement to snag a client. Like, for instance, a pen. "If you have a great ad but people can't remember the number, it won't do much good," says Dallas lawyer Robert A. Kraft. "I know I don't have a pen handy when I watch TV." That's why Kraft took writing out of the mix and made his firm's number easy to remember: 999-9999. "Once they call it," he says, "they don't forget it."

Kraft's phone number of repeating nines is one of the more subtle variations of what is known in marketing lingo as a vanity, or mnemonic phone number. More obvious examples are phone numbers that spell out a message like 1-800-HURT-911, a toll-free number owned by New York lawyer Phil Franckel.

These numbers may seem trite, but a 2002 independent research study found that 58 percent of people who listened to a radio ad with a vanity number could recall that number after hearing the ad only once. When the ad contained a numeric phone number, recall among listeners plunged to only 8 percent. The study was commissioned by 800 Response, a Burlington, Vt.-based marketing company that specializes in obtaining vanity phone numbers for clients—including many lawyers, says Laura Noonan, vice president of marketing for the company. The company's typical lawyer client? Bankruptcy and plaintiffs personal injury practitioners, she says.

Before deciding between, say, WIN-MONY or LAW-1111, it's important to make sure the chosen combination passes ethical muster. There's nothing unethical per se about vanity numbers, says Will Hornsby, an expert on lawyer advertising and staff counsel in the ABA Division for Legal Services. Rather, the potential ethical problem lies in the phrasing. "For example, 1-800-I-WIN-CASES would be unethical," he says, "because it is making an unsubstantiated claim, creating unjustified expectations that can be true but still be misleading." He says it would also be misleading to advertise a number for a practice area where a lawyer has no experience.

But ordering a vanity number is not as easy as calling a local phone company. "It's not like domain names, where you can come up with something and get what you want or close to it," Noonan says. That's because each phone company only controls certain numbers, she says. For example, if you want a number with "LAW" in it, a local phone company may be able to provide a number with that word somewhere in it. But only the phone company that owns the "529" exchange, which spells LAW on the dial, can license a number that begins with LAW. That's why 800 Response specializes in numbers that start with "NEW" and "NEXT"—because it used to be a phone company, and it was assigned a catalog of numbers with the prefix "639."

Of course, it's possible to get nearly any number, for a price. "It really depends on how much value someone places on a specific vanity number," Noonan says. Companies like 800 Response are able to keep their inventory of numbers available nearly all the time because of a "shared use" practice, which routes incoming calls to clients based on the geographic location of the caller.

These companies can also help clients get a toll-free number with an "800" prefix, by far the better known of the available toll-free prefixes like 877 or 866. These prefixes are nearly impossible to get from the local phone companies because the supply was exhausted years ago, Noonan says.

Kraft believes his vanity number has been worth the expense because it keeps clients coming back, often years after their initial cases closed. Clients "see so many ads that it's tempting for them to call another law firm when they have a new problem—especially if they're having difficulty remembering your name and number," he says. "You want them to remember and call [you] before they see ads from another law firm, and having that number makes it easier."