

WHAT'S THAT AVATAR DOING SPEAKING WITH MY CLIENT?

BY RITCHENYA A. DODD

Hill Wallack LLP is not your typical poster-firm for new media marketing. Although we have a few blogs, we do not yet have video on our Web site or invite our clients to follow us on Twitter or visit us on Facebook. Recently, however, we participated in our first-ever virtual conference and trade show, the Virtual Green Build Event, sponsored by the New Jersey Builders Association (NJBA). One of our partners gave a presentation via an avatar, speaking to a conference hall of attendee-avatars, who could toggle between seeing his PowerPoint presentation full-screen or watching the stage from their seats. Attendees also could scan the room to see who else was in attendance, and whisper to other attendees. And I, also in avatar form, manned our virtual booth.

During each day of the event, I logged into the conference site from my computer, launched my avatar (a thinner, blonder version of me) into the exhibition hall, walked her to our booth, and steered her to a position behind the booth's podium. (The counter came in handy because the avatar I chose wore a suit that looked professional from the waist up, but sported a rather short skirt.)

Partner Henry T. Chou presented on state incentives to encourage green construction and answered questions.

Our virtual booth featured our firm's logo, images from our Web site, a clickable description of our firm, and links to relevant content, such as our blog, articles and descriptions of our practices.

(Confession: This was the NJBA's first virtual event too, and the exhibition hall traffic was a little slow between sessions. So some avatars—not mine, of course—passed the time turning cartwheels and doing the “Egyptian dance.” These features apparently came standard with the avatars, though adjustable skirt lengths did not.)



SO WHAT'S A FIRM LIKE OURS DOING IN A PLACE LIKE THIS? Well, the short answer is that this event supported one of the primary business development goals of one of our major practice groups.

Hill Wallack is a regional commercial firm based in Princeton, New Jersey, and has long been known as one of the premier land use law firms in the state. Credit for building this brand capital goes to deceased firm founder Henry Hill, who developed an area of the law in the 1970s that fueled much of the suburban develop-

ment in the state for the next two decades.

But times change, and so must law firms. One of my missions as marketing director is to help the land use practice broaden its brand from traditional zoning issues to some growing areas such as redevelopment, environmental law and green building.

Hill Wallack is a long-time sponsor of the New Jersey Builders Association, speaking at its events, writing for its publications, volunteering in leadership positions, in addition to serving as land use counsel to the NJBA. Each year we exhibit at the NJBA's major trade show, too, and this year we are sponsoring "green benches" (benches made of sustainable materials) along the primary walkway of the exhibition hall, placing our logo in a visible spot and tying us to the NJBA's green building theme. So when the NJBA decided to hold the Virtual Green Build Event just months before its live conference, there appeared to be several benefits to participating:

- We would be supporting a long-time client sector.
- We could showcase our capabilities to a more intimate audience.

- We had an opportunity to communicate our message before the live convention, providing two bites at the apple.

- Registration for the virtual event was relatively inexpensive (a few hundred dollars). I also figured this was a good opportunity to try a new platform with the assistance of an allied organization.

FROM IDEA TO AVATAR. Once firm leadership gave the go-ahead for participating, Henry, the primary author of our land use blog, readily agreed to be our front man.

I had assumed the virtual event would be conducted through a series of webinars—and hadn't anticipated the avatars. They proved tricky to customize, so Henry and I opted for off-the-rack models. The conference vendor and our graphics team worked to customize our logo and other images to fit the virtual booth dimensions. Then we loaded content onto the site, and after some trial and error, we had a great-looking virtual booth.

And, though traffic wasn't heavy, we did make some good connections. For example, I met one attendee who said he thought the presentations had been well

done, and it turned out this gentleman had attended Henry's presentation—and he turned out to be a supervisor at one of our major client builders, but not a contact we knew beforehand.

We also were provided a list of attendees, and intend to send them updates on green building issues, growing our contacts list and hopefully steering traffic to the blog.

TAKE-AWAY. Participating in the virtual conference allowed us to build stronger connections with one of our key trade organizations, and strengthen our brand in a niche area of increasing importance. While I doubt that virtual events will replace live meetings, they do offer an easy, inexpensive way to connect with target audiences without leaving the office.

An added bonus was that participating in this event was more fun than I anticipated. Next time, though, I'd like to be able to select my avatar's attire. **LP**

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