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THE PLACE TO NETWORK

Innovative Networking Strategies for Women Attorneys

By Christy Burke

The glass ceiling ... the “old boy” network ... work/life balance challenges: Women certainly know how it feels to have to fight for their share of legal business, and sometimes to fight for the very existence of their legal careers. If pressed, undoubtedly any woman attorney could come up with a litany of reasons why she cannot be a rainmaker or proactive networker, ranging from responsibilities at home to discrimination or being underestimated in terms of capabilities by bosses or clients, both male and female.

How many women have walked into a boardroom only to be sent to fetch coffee, even if they are lead outside counsel? In addition, women’s legal careers are often interrupted by family obligations or motherhood, making their career path more of a zigzag than a straight line. Fortunately, there are a growing number of female attorneys who have become talented rainmakers despite these looming pressures, proving that raking in the business is indeed possible for women, even while juggling a myriad of professional and personal responsibilities.

In general, women seem reluctant to promote themselves and tout their own accomplishments. This perhaps results from cultural conditioning they received as girls — “don’t brag,” “speak when spoken to,” “sit quietly with hands folded and ankles crossed.” We all know that modesty is certainly *not* the best policy when it comes to business development, so women know they need to blast through their acquired politeness to unapologetically advance themselves.

NETWORKING IS THE KEY

The good news is that rather than searching for excuses, many female lawyers are aggressively and successfully networking to develop their client rosters despite challenges they face. These enterprising women rise to senior partnership positions at AmLaw 200 firms, go to smaller firms or go solo. They do this while still creating their own networking forums and building enviable reputations that any lawyer, man or woman, would be proud to have.

Women business developers underscore that constant networking is absolutely essential for the success of their client development efforts. Also, since women sometimes must both enter and re-enter the legal workforce multiple times due to family responsibilities and extended breaks, they need to build connections that will last over time. The quality of their rolodexes will allow them to jumpstart their practices effectively even after a hiatus of several months or years.

There are many strategies that work. In addition to leveling the playing field by providing quality legal services and building strong relationships, the most accomplished female rainmakers can actually leverage the fact that they’re a woman to be an *advantage* rather than a neutral or a liability.

PERSONAL ACTIVITIES AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The fact that many women attorneys are working mothers definitely poses time-crunches, but family obligations also provide a wealth of opportunities for informal networking. Sari Gabay-Rafiy, founding partner of Gabay-Rafiy & Bowler LLP, says, “I have found that great clients and cases often come from our involvement in personal activities outside of the billable atmosphere, such as a neighbor’s barbecue, a school drop-off or a child’s birthday party.”

Prominent criminal defense attorney Rae Downes Koshetz, a former New York Police Department Deputy Commissioner, says that meeting people in a variety of settings has been essential in building her practice. According to Koshetz, “You never know where you’ll make a connection and perhaps parlay that into new business. The more people you talk to, the more chances you have for them to hire you for legal services.” Koshetz says that by meeting people consistently and staying in touch with them on a weekly or monthly basis, women can grow their businesses exponentially. She says that because women are strong multi-taskers and have interests outside their legal careers, they naturally meet people who can see them in action in a variety of settings. “It’s a fact of life that people with legal problems hire lawyers they like and trust.”

General community involvement can also be a plus in building awareness for your legal practice. In 1999, elder law practitioner Linda Ershow-Levenberg joined two other attorneys to form Fink, Rosner, Ershow-Levenberg in Clark, NJ. In addition to staying in touch with her contacts from a prior position at the State of New Jersey's Attorney General's office, she also has made the most of her extensive contact network in eastern Union County, New Jersey, where she has lived and worked for 30 years. "I have been very involved in community organizations, my synagogue, the YMHA, etc. and this is key when trying to network and build up a new practice. Tap into the network you already have."

Gabay-Rafiy & Bowler LLP partner Anne Marie Bowler started an "Ask the Lawyer" column in her community newspaper. She says that the column, in addition to her being active in local organizations "is an excellent way to get our firm name out there while also giving back to the community."

WOMEN'S NETWORKING ORGANIZATIONS

Bar associations, professional associations and business networking groups all provide viable opportunities for women lawyers to network and make quality contacts. In spite of the proliferation of options, some women have taken additional initiative to create their own organizations specifically geared toward fostering female lawyer business networking and empowerment.

Diversity-minded and progressive law firms have actively developed networking groups to catalyze women attorney business development. Donna Praiss and Kathy Robb, both partners at Hunton & Williams' New York office, explain that many years ago, the women partners, counsel and associates in the firm's

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various offices got together to talk about mentoring to help the younger women attorneys succeed at the firm. They started inviting women professionals to events in each of the offices. The program, which was developed as the Hunton & Williams Women's Networking Forum in the Richmond office, is active at several of the firm's 19 locations, each of which host a locally focused Women's Networking Forum.

Robb notes that each office creates its own networking events in keeping with its regional culture and client base. "In Washington, DC, we invite authors of interest to speak about their books, and the events tend to be held in a museum or beautiful public building in DC. In Charlotte, NC, we hold events at clients' corporate offices and have noted business-women speak, and in New York, events tend to be held at the office and incorporate a charitable component. These events are about getting to know people — starting and maintaining relationships — and providing a forum for the women who attend from outside the firm to get to know each other as well."

Praiss says that such gatherings help women overcome the reluctance to talk about their capabilities and they allow satisfied clients to talk to prospects. She recalls, "We hosted an event called 'Women in Focus' where we had a women's photographers group visit our office — we invited our female clients and attorneys. Our women clients were openly praising Hunton & Williams' attorneys who work for them, and introducing the prospects to their favorite attorneys."

Robb adds that at these events, the supportive and encouraging nature of women really shines through. She relates having seen female clients walking up to a group of potential clients to introduce an attorney with a rave, saying "this is Donna — I work with her on patent litigation and she is terrific." The same reciprocal support can take root among colleagues, which is valuable since cross-pollination and referrals are so key to business development efforts.

In a related but different effort, Robb also spearheaded the firm's Women's Network for a Sustainable Future (WNSF), which is a non-profit she started five years ago with three other co-founders. The organization provides programming for women executives to explore ideas about sustainability issues, and has had a positive impact on the development of her environmental law practice.

MENTORING

Women attorneys not only need the venues established so they can make connections, but many of them also need to build confidence and learn from more senior female mentors who have paved the way.

Just recently, R.R. Donnelley, a large public company, created the Women in Law Empowerment Forum. The Forum's mission is to create a dialogue for the purpose of educating women in law on how to become leaders in the workplace and in the community by building, exercising and implementing a strong sense of empowerment.

Betiayn Tursi (Editor-in-Chief of this publication), who co-chairs the Forum with Peggy Cohen, Vice President of Donnelley's New York and Philadelphia Markets, is a long-time advocate for women in law issues and says that the Forum is going to become "the place to be" for women in law firms who want to achieve their career goals.

The Women in Law Empowerment Forum held its inaugural event in May 2007 in New York City, a panel discussion focusing on the role of mentoring in attaining partnership and generating business. Held in a packed ballroom, the event featured several women lawyers of different ages, backgrounds and skill levels all of whom had one thing in common - they were acutely aware of the importance of women helping other women to get ahead in the practice of law.

THE THREE PS OF PR

Press Coverage, Publishing and Presentations. Through traditional public relations efforts such as writing articles and speaking engagements,

women lawyers can position themselves as experts in their field and use the resulting notoriety to network and build business. Organizations like women's bar associations and women's business councils are always looking for quality speakers, and most of them also have publications that are usually open to receiving good content. Gabay-Rafiy has gained a great deal from participation in the Women's Business Enterprise National Council, the National Association of Women Lawyers and Ladies Who Launch, a program geared toward female entrepreneurs. Hundreds of organizations exist on a city, county, state and national level so it's just a question of determining which ones capture the largest share of your target market.

When approaching an association

or publication regarding a topic, simply prepare an abstract on the topic you'd like to speak on or write about, and find the appropriate e-mail contact and then follow up by phone. If your topic is educational and informative rather than self-serving or promotional, you will have a better chance of a positive response. Many women hire professional PR talent to be their "agents" in procuring these opportunities, although others have garnered opportunities via the do-it-yourself method.

CONCLUSION

Women attorneys are still taking golf lessons and reading the sports pages, and sometimes are excluded from "locker room" networking. The need to compete with men is never

going to go away. That being said, it's inspiring to know that women are achieving great results in the legal profession and are always reinventing themselves and their practices to attain new heights. Building relationships is a strength that most women innately possess. By taking this natural ability and directing it toward business development, female attorneys can end up on top — and can help other women along the way.



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