

## Networking for Women Lawyers



by *Eva Wisnik*

Over the past few years, we have seen a rise in the number of law firms requesting us to present networking programs that are geared specifically toward women. What has sparked this commitment to teaching women how to build and expand their networks? Some of this may be the result of clients requiring diverse representation on their cases. Jennifer Selendy, litigation partner at the New York office of Kirkland & Ellis, says, “We want to provide our talented women with the skills and resources they need to succeed at the firm and to do client development.” The fact is that women who have their own clients have greater control over their work and careers.

Is networking for women lawyers different from that of their male colleagues? Yes and no. The definition of networking for both men and women is the same: building and nurturing long-term professional relationships that ideally result in new business. What is different is how each group might go about initiating and cultivating these relationships, as well as the obstacles women perceive in networking that men may not even know exist.

Women often feel more confident networking when they have a definite role. This point is well illustrated by Kathy Keneally, a tax litigation partner at Fulbright & Jaworski’s New York office, who has focused her networking within bar associations. She reports that building relationships with her colleagues has led to significant referrals over the years, and that leadership roles within these associations have given her credentials that have tipped the balance when clients selected counsel.

### Surmounting the Obstacles

What are the biggest obstacles women face in building their professional networks? Sometimes it is their fear of being perceived as pushy or too aggressive. Even though we have moved into the 21st century, many women lawyers we have trained on business development skills refuse to call a male in-house counsel whom they have known for years and ask him to have dinner or drinks for fear of being perceived as inappropriate.

So what can women do to prevent any possible uncomfortable situations but still network effectively with men? Blair Soyster, employment partner in Clifford Chance’s New York office says, “I feel more comfortable networking with male business contacts over lunch or breakfast. The ideal is when I

can integrate my personal and professional life by taking a client, their spouse and my spouse out for a mutually fun event like a Yankees game.”

The reality is that women need to spend time with business contacts, even if it requires women attorneys to step out of their comfort zones. Clients are much more likely to hire a lawyer when they believe that she understands them and can help them achieve their business goals. According to Hilarie Bass, chair of the national litigation group at Greenberg Traurig in Miami, “The biggest obstacle women lawyers face when networking for new business is their inability to ask for business. Most women, no matter how successful they are, are uncomfortable promoting themselves.

“First, you need to be confident in your legal ability before you can convince a client to hire you. Second, women need to get over the fear that they will be thought of poorly if they say good things about themselves.” She continues, “Practice in front of the mirror if necessary, but you have to ‘make the ask.’”

Cynthia Shoss, partner in the insurance group at LeBoeuf Lamb in New York, provides this insight: “It may be more comfortable to network with groups of women, but it may be more effective to push through this discomfort and network in coed groups. I find it more effective to get business from industry groups, which are usually male dominant.” In our training, we teach women to develop and master a short introduction that will enable a person to know exactly who you are and what you do within the first moments of a conversation.

Catherine Alman MacDonagh, director of business development in Day, Berry’s Boston office and author of a chapter in “Women Lawyers Rainmaking Game,” identified the lack of confidence as an obstacle for some women. Catherine says, “Women build relationships very naturally, yet they are challenged by not wanting to impose on their relationships for business purposes. Women can be more successful in their business development if they shift their thinking from imposing on contacts to helping prospective clients.”

MacDonagh is also the founder and director of Legal Sales and Service Organization Inc. (LSSO). Recently, she and Dr. Harry Keshet, who is the director of LSSO’s Women Lawyers Research Project, surveyed 450 women attorneys to find out

their methods of business development. Although one-third of the respondents averaged over \$800,000 in origination fees, only 33 percent of these same women said that they ask existing clients for referrals.

Deborah Gersh, chair of DLA Piper Rudnick Gray Cary's corporate practice group in Chicago, seems to be the exception to this statistic and insists, "You have to ask for business." She feels very comfortable asking new clients for work. "I say to my contact, 'I would love to work for your company. If there is ever a conflict with your current counsel, I hope you will think of me.'"

### **Women's Networking Events Build New Business**

Some firms are helping to facilitate the networking process by hosting firm events for their women lawyers. Epstein Becker & Green's Women's Initiative was launched over four years ago with the goal of creating an environment in which professional women can network. Rachel Silverman, Esq., executive director of the EBG Women's Initiative, states, "We need to have women's networking programs, because women want the opportunity to connect with each other. This connection is over the challenges they all face and the comfort they feel knowing that they can be themselves with each other." Rachel adds that after their third annual golf outing this past June, all participants surveyed said that they "made significant business contacts at the event."

In spring 2006, Paul Hastings will be hosting a women-centered event targeting C-level executive women. Martha Stewart will be among the presenters at this weekend-long event. Elizabeth Noe, co-chair of firm-wide attorney devel-

opment and vice chair of the corporate department for Paul Hastings, says, "We wanted to create something unique that goes beyond just social opportunities, and our goal is to provide a forum for these high-level executives to have an interchange on professional business issues, including changes effecting global corporations." Elizabeth adds, "For this event, we partnered with a consulting organization whose client base has a profile similar to ours. If the event is as successful as we think it will be, then we and that organization's women will have cross-selling opportunities, and our respective clients will have added to their networking base."

Blair Soyster says, "There is no question that making the time to network is truly a challenge. But as a senior lawyer who is committed to client development, it is critical for me to invest the time necessary for business development." Deborah Gersh suggests, "Treat networking as a client. Women need to carve out time in their schedules for client development in the same way they do for doing client work." Hilarie Bass advises, "Pick networking activities that you truly enjoy, and it won't be a burden."

How do you fit networking and rainmaking into an already hectic workday? We teach women lawyers the "one action a day" rule. This rule encourages lawyers to do one thing each day toward networking and business development. These actions can include dropping a note to a contact congratulating her on a promotion, clipping an article and sending it to a potential client, or having breakfast with a business colleague. By planting seeds daily for business development, networking becomes a professional habit that is integral to a lawyer's career development.

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