

Articles

"Beyond the Links"

Kathleen J. Wu
Texas Lawyer
March 16, 1998

Let's face it, most women aren't golfers. And, for the most part, we don't salivate at the thought of 50-yard line seats at a Cowboys game.

So why, in these days of growing prominence of women in the legal profession, do business development events still focus on sports? Law firms have been slow to accept the fact that women lawyers, and women clients, often require a different approach.

I'm lucky enough to be at a firm that has a strong record in this area. In 1996, a group of women partners, with the help and encouragement of firm management, held a women-only retreat in Colorado Springs, Colo. The outing received national press coverage (a public relations coup in and of itself) and was an unmitigated success.

The 100 or so lawyers, clients and potential clients who attended spent the weekend attending seminars on both gender- and nongender-related issues and getting pampered at a spa. It was an ideal weekend for harried professional women who needed some time away to recharge and regroup. Besides, there's something about walking around in a towel with your partners and clients that makes it impossible not to bond with them.

Though the 1996 weekend was the most notable women-only outing at my firm, it's far from the only one the firm has sponsored. In the past, we've had hiking and skiing trips, and even a fly-fishing weekend, all of which served to solidify existing client relationships and bring in new business.

Sadly, most firms haven't followed suit. Putting such events together, both here and elsewhere, takes a generous dose of support from management and a lot of moxie on the part of the organizers.

Every Day is Guy Day

The resistance stems from the question of why, particularly in these days of "equal opportunity," should women have their own brand of business development? Isn't this, as I've heard some male lawyers call it, reverse discrimination?

Of course it isn't. The vast majority of schmoozing events are already male-only, or, at the very least, aimed primarily at men. While this may be primarily for historical reasons, and not intentionally aimed at excluding women, it does not make the need for change any less urgent. In short, every day is male day. So why not make some effort to accommodate the rest of the population?

Besides, business development tailored to women works.

Some 20 percent of U.S. general counsel are women, and that figure doesn't even take into account all the mid-level in-house counsel who direct where their companies' legal business goes. Wooing those women with skyboxes at baseball games or (yippee) golf is often misguided and, more important, unsuccessful. (Before I get vilified as sexist for stereotyping women as nonsports fans, please note that I didn't say all women are turned off by all sports. Some women - including some of my closest friends - find most events as exhilarating as men do. And I would never miss a chance to attend the U.S. Open.)

Because lawyer/client relationships are often based on personal chemistry, it stands to reason that clients are most likely to hire those lawyers they connect with on a personal level (assuming, of course, the lawyer in question is competent).

The New Girls Network

Articles

Women lawyers should be encouraged by their firms and the partners in charge of client development to find their own brand of schmoozing. Everything's fair game, from taking potential clients to "high tea" or to get a manicure, to arranging family-friendly get-togethers to which clients can bring their children. When you're doing work for an existing client, your aim is to satisfy your client's goals, not your own. The same holds true in entertaining or marketing potential clients; they are the important ones, and our efforts should be tailored to reflect that.

Women lawyers should muster up the guts to insist on such get-togethers. While it may mean expending a bit of political capital, when it results in new work, nobody will care what gender attended the event.

The same rule, by the way, holds true for recruiting purposes. I've seen male partners pondering which sporting event to take a coveted female law student to. Though some women may enjoy ball games, many others will grit their teeth through a forgettable three-hour experience. Worse yet, others would consider such an approach thick-headed and indicative of a firm that hasn't adapted to its dual-gendered population.

Women lawyers should feel they can safely organize an outing for their female colleagues, clients and recruits. It's high time, and in everyone's interest, for the New Girl's network to come of age.

Originally appeared in **TEXAS LAWYER**

Kathleen J. Wu is a commercial real estate lawyer and managing partner of the Dallas office of Houston's Andrews & Kurth. Her e-mail address is kathleenwu@akllp.com. The views represented here are her own and do not represent those of the firm.

Copyright 1998, Texas Lawyer. All rights reserved.