



Creating Ambassadors of Goodwill

Law firms are recognizing that it pays to develop a key resource: their former lawyers

By Steven A. Meyerowitz

It takes a lot of effort and funds for a law firm to recruit and train its attorneys. If they stay for a sufficient period of time, improve their professional skills and start to bring in new business, the firm is likely to see a nice return on its investment.

Nowadays, however, lawyers at some point typically leave the place that has given them their start, unlike days gone by, when lawyers usually would stay at a firm for their whole professional careers. Today, they may go to a competitor firm, to a smaller firm, in-house or to a business that may or may not be a client of the firm. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that a law firm should just write off the time and dollars it spent on developing its former lawyers.

Rather, as increasing numbers of law firms are coming to understand, a firm's former attorneys can play an important role in the firm's marketing and client-development activities. To tap that resource, many law firms are creating alumni programs or are formalizing or expanding the basic elements of alumni programs that they already have in place.

Stacy West Clark, a Philadelphia-area marketing advisor to small and mid-sized firms and the former director of client relations for Morgan, Lewis & Bockius L.L.P., is a professed "huge believer" in alumni programs. A firm's former lawyers, she states, "are messengers of the quality of the work the firm does and the quality of its people." Communicating with them, interacting with them and treating them nicely — indeed, treating them as nicely as if they were potential clients — is in a firm's best interests, she says. Imagine if someone were to ask a firm's former lawyer what it was like working at his or her former law firm and the lawyer were to say, "They treated me like gold!"

Not only that, but a firm's former lawyers may be the firm's future clients, especially if the lawyers are in the position to retain other lawyers. Lianne MacDonald, the senior marketing manager at Thacher Proffitt & Wood L.L.P. in New York City, points out that Thacher Proffitt alumni frequently go to work "at leading investment banks, public and private companies, government agencies and a range of participants in the financial services industry." In those positions, they might turn to their old firm for legal advice and representation. All it may take is a little regular contact with their former colleagues.

Elements of a Program

As MacDonald explains, a law firm alumni program, in essence, "is about people; it is about relationships." A firm can promote and develop those relationships in face-to-face meetings, in writing and electronically.

MacDonald believes that it is important for an alumni program to create opportunities "where people can get together in

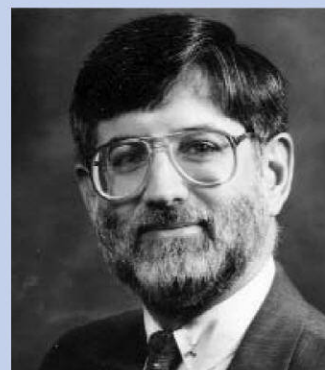
an open format," such as at cocktail parties. Another option is to do what her firm does: Invite alumni to the annual client party. Consultant Stacy Clark advocates something similar, suggesting that alumni should be invited to attend a firm's annual holiday celebration.

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These kinds of face-to-face meetings should be complemented by other communication steps. For example, many firms create a hard-copy alumni directory, which they then distribute (at the firm's expense) to alumni. Such a directory is something that alumni almost undoubtedly will retain and review. They'll want to see what their former colleagues are doing and where they're working. Indeed, they're also likely to use the book when they need to find an attorney to hire or to whom they can refer a matter. Where better to look than in a directory of people who took the same professional steps they took, who were recruited and hired by the same firm for which they worked and who, in many instances, worked side by side with them? As Clark points out, alumni know "they can rely" on other alumni.

Another kind of written communication that can be part of an alumni program is an alumni newsletter. Such a document, which Thacher Proffitt's MacDonald says can be published quarterly, or even more frequently, should include news about alumni but also should have news about the firm, including recent victories, significant new business, new partners, publications by the firm's lawyers and the like. This will keep their former firm in their minds.

Technology also can help a law firm keep in touch with alumni. As MacDonald explains, firms can use e-mail to stay in regular contact with their former attorneys. E-mail can be used to announce



Steven A. Meyerowitz, a lawyer and freelance writer, is a regular contributor to The Pennsylvania Lawyer.

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new events, distribute alumni newsletters or offer the firm's former lawyers the opportunity to receive other firm publications.

A relatively new technological enhancement to alumni programs is proving very popular: an alumni page, accessible only by password, on a firm's Web site.

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Although alumni pages differ among firms, the best include an alumni directory, discussion forums, firm news and events, and even a listing of job and career opportunities. They also have links to the other pages in the firm's site, including lawyer profiles and practice group descriptions. Importantly, some alumni Web pages have links to content about other issues that are growing in importance to many clients and in-house counsel, including the firm's pro bono work and diversity at the firm.

Every Former Lawyer?

Some firms might recognize the value in communicating with their former lawyers or, more precisely, might believe that there is value to communicating with *some* of their former lawyers. Surely, they say, lawyers who work for competing firms cannot be part of an alumni program! Obviously, lawyers who left because

they were asked to leave, either because their work was not up to par or they were unsuccessful for other reasons, such as failing to develop new business, should not be allowed to participate! And, of course, lawyers who had problems with firm management or who were (and perhaps still are) angry at the firm should not be invited!

Not so fast. Consultant Stacy Clark begs to differ. "We all make friends, and we all have a past we like to revisit," she says. Because a good alumni program is "based on relationships," it should include *all* of a firm's former lawyers. That includes those who have gone on to competing firms. As she points out, "you never know when they may have a conflict and need to refer a client or when they may move on to a noncompeting position." Clark also believes that the positive outreach that comes with a successful alumni program can help turn the memory of a negative relationship into something more positive. At the least, it might stop a firm's former lawyer from bashing his or her former firm.

Every Firm? Even Small Ones?

Law firm alumni programs are not just for large international firms. As Clark states, "Even when one lawyer leaves a firm, the firm should have an alumni program."

Obviously, the number of alumni will affect the characteristics of the alumni program a firm will create. A firm with only a handful of alumni will not have to rent out a large ballroom for an annual get-together. Lunch or dinner at a nice restaurant may suffice. With that said, there are some common elements that all firms should consider when creating a program.

Getting Started

The first step in creating an alumni program is to start at the very moment an attorney is about to leave. Andy Havens, a marketing management consultant and co-founder of Sanestorm Marketing, says that one issue seldom considered is the use of appropriate "exit" processes and

“ongoing intelligence/data maintenance when dealing with lawyers who leave a firm.” In his view, if a firm has good client relationship management (CRM) software and is using it to track various “touches” for possible business development efforts, the firm “should also be using it (or something similar) to keep track of firm alumni.” Beginning that process — officially and with an understanding that it will continue — the moment the firm learns that the lawyer will be leaving is important, Havens says, because updating the contact will be natural and expected. His bottom line: “If you don’t track and manage the relationship like crazy, you lose that resource.”

Does the talk of CRM software, holiday parties and the like mean that alumni programs are expensive, involved processes? Not necessarily. Although some firms, in the words of Thatcher Proffitt’s Lianne MacDonald, will have a committee of people “from senior management, the partner/associate level, marketing including public relations, recruiting and the HR department,” Stacy Clark suggests that all that is not necessary for every firm all the time. According to Clark, an alumni program “doesn’t have to cost anything more than a phone call or a letter.” Indeed, she concludes, it can start with “one attorney saying to a former attorney from the firm, ‘Let’s have lunch.’ ” 🌐