

As seen in The Century City Lawyer  
A publication of the Century City Bar Association, 2007

## MARKETING YOUR PRACTICE THROUGH ORGANIZATIONS

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In my last installment, I gave you some general concepts for marketing your law practice, including targeting your market and overcoming fear and other psychological obstacles. This time, I expound on joining organizations as a way to meet and develop prospects.

### What to join?

Choose the right organizations. In addition to bar associations, consider groups that attract people who share your other interests, such as hobbies, politics, or charitable work. If an organization's goals do not interest you or if you perceive no potential benefit, you should not join. You won't participate in spite of your best intentions, and your lack of enthusiasm will show.

For a specialized practice, I have found that the best referrals come from other lawyers. To meet lawyers outside of your specialty, participate in lawyers' organizations. If you practice in or near Century City, you have three without even looking: the Century City Bar Association, the Los Angeles County Bar Association, and the State Bar of California. The State Bar's annual meeting presents tremendous opportunities for networking. Once, at the annual meeting, I met a real-estate lawyer who sat next to me in a seminar. Within a year, I referred him a good client.

Local bar associations can help you meet lawyers outside your specialty as long as you don't limit your activity to your own specialty's section, whose members are your competitors. Watch for and attend functions that attract members of the entire association. Also go to section meetings of lawyers in specialties that might complement yours. Meeting those lawyers can lead to referrals back and forth. For example, if you are a real-estate lawyer, attend meetings of the taxation section that are tangentially related to your field, such as seminars on taxation of real-estate transactions.

Statewide specialty organizations, such as the State Bar's section for your area of expertise offer the potential of referrals from members who practice outside your geographic area. Establishing a presence in the American Bar Association section for your area of practice can produce referrals from around the country.

To join is not enough.

Just joining an organization puts your name in a directory but accomplishes little else. To promote your practice through organizations, as well as to reap the other benefits of belonging, you need to do more. Here are some ideas.

### Eating and drinking

Bar associations and other organizations put on meetings and other events for the general membership. Use these events to meet referral sources. A typical evening meeting starts with a reception, then segues into dinner. Here's how to extract more benefit from those events.

If you arrive at the reception and see nobody you know, seek out someone who is standing alone and introduce yourself. Ask what kind of law he practices. After some conversation, ask for a business card. Not only will it give you his business name and address, it will remind you of his name, which you will have forgotten. Then give him your card, a gesture he will appreciate since by now he has forgotten your name too.

If, on the other hand, you see someone you already know, reinforce the relationship. Remind her of where you work and what you do. Eventually, an acquaintance of hers will come along, and she will introduce you to each other. Take it from there.

Soon it's time to sit down for the meal. If you came with someone in your firm, do not sit at the same table. Greet the people on each side of you. Show an interest in them. To be interesting, be interested.

Plan your follow-up before you leave. Reflect on the conversations you had and think of something you can mail to the people you have met to help them remember you. If you know of a good article that expands on something you've talked about, send a copy. Do it immediately—before they forget you.

Lunch meetings work much the same. Many don't start with a reception, so get there a few minutes early and meet people as they arrive.

### Stand out.

To extract the maximum benefit from an organization, distinguish yourself from the other members. In meetings, for example, speak up when you have something intelligent to say. But don't get carried away. Don't become that weirdo who shows up at every meeting with a dog-eared copy of *Roberts Rules of Order* and shouts "Point of order!" every few minutes.

Volunteer for a committee. Take on a project that you care about and do a good job. When you agree to do something, do it. And do it on time. Showing people that

you honor commitments and get things done demonstrates the traits that clients look for in lawyers. Offer to chair your committee and to report on its activities directly to the board. Submit a written report to distribute with the minutes, then offer to attend a meeting of the governing board and give a brief oral summary. Those on the board will get to know and respect you.

Fast-forward a few months. You've joined an organization, attended meetings, and maybe served on a committee. You like the people and are starting to feel comfortable. The others now know and respect you. It's time to move up, usually to the board. From there, you can become an officer.

Plan your strategy. Learn about the politics of your organization. Read the bylaws, then call past and current board members and officers. Invite them to lunch and ask for their support. Once you are on the board, you will meet more people and deepen relationships with those you know. You can also take steps to show everyone that you are not just another board member who limits his contributions to an occasional perfunctory appearance.

When the office of secretary opens, volunteer. It's an easy job to get because nobody else wants it. Make the minutes informative and readable—not like a legal document. When somebody says something intelligent, mention her by name in the minutes and summarize the comment. Distribute the minutes to the other board members before the next meeting so they have a chance to read them.

After enough time on the board to further impress everyone with your competence and diligence, consider moving up to another office, even chair or president. How far should you go? Evaluate at each stage how much time each office will take and how much you and the organization benefit from your work.

The decision to move up may set off a crisis of confidence. If you catch yourself asking "Who am I to lead this organization?," stop wondering. Others less qualified than you have risen to high positions in organizations simply by showing up, expressing an interest, doing the best job they could, and doing the things necessary to advance.

#### A word of caution

In organizations that exist for reasons other than business networking, members quickly spot and shun people who shamelessly join only to trawl for new business. So find ways to give value to the organization. Earning a reputation as a solid member who works for the good of the organization is good marketing.

#### Evaluate

Review from time to time what benefits you get from each organization. Balance those benefits against their cost in time, energy, and money. Take into

account that months and years can elapse before your activity in an organization yields a referral. Stay in the ones that meet your needs. You might even find that organizations you joined for marketing produce no referrals but bring other rewards—perhaps the satisfaction that comes from service to your profession or your community.

### Coming up

In future issues, I will share some ideas on how to get to know your prospects better without scaring them away, how to encourage them to refer good clients to you, and how to keep track of all the people you will meet.

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