

Business & Careers

Client events more than just saying thanks



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The Coach

If you are like most firms large and small, on occasion you host events to thank your clients and referral sources. While that's all well and good to give them your food and drink, what opportunities are you missing to further engage them, build loyalty and expand the services your firm and your lawyers offer your clients?

This column serves to point out some of the opportunities your firm can discover if you provide a little "professional development" for your lawyers ahead of the event.

So while the first purpose of your event might be to thank your clients, it could be so much more. You can also use it to support your unique brand. Even more importantly, it can introduce clients to the range of services the firm has to offer, or "cross-serve." (I'm not a fan of the term "cross-selling.")

The first thing you will have to do is convince your lawyers on the value of cross-serving. It is not about forcing services on your clients or stealing clients away from other lawyers. It is not about pushing or pulling. Cross-serving is about strengthening the relationship, providing added value for the clients and reducing the risk of losing them to another firm because they don't know you can



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take of their other legal needs.

Cross-serving is about gaining a better understanding of your client's needs, and then taking action to take care of those needs. It's a win for each lawyer, as they become a trusted advisor (knowing the big picture and offering guidance and advice along the way). It's a win for your clients, as they'll be better served. And it's a win for the firm, as you will likely find untapped opportunities and provide services so they don't go elsewhere.

A case study example: While at a client event, an associate was talking to one of his clients. The associate provided some lower level work to this client but got the him talking about his business. As it turns out, this client had a very large and impending issue (far beyond the reach of this associate). But because this associate asked the client questions about his business, he learned of the need.

Following the event the associate alerted the managing partner, who within 24 hours had met with the client and was walking out of his office with a huge retainer for this large project. Had the associate not learned this, what might have happened? That business would have landed elsewhere.

What is your firm missing out on? This is all about discovering untapped opportunities and learning how to further and better serve your clients and contacts.

Once your firm has sent the invitations out and the RSVPs have come back, your lawyers have to prepare for the event. Have them:

- Send a personal e-mail to their RSVP'd clients a couple of days prior to the event.
- Identify additional practice areas, lawyers and other contacts from the RSVP list that might be of interest to their clients.
- From the main RSVP list, iden-

tify two or three targets and then touch base with the inviting lawyer to learn more about the client and get introduced at the event.

During the event, get them talking — not making pitches, but listening and learning:

- Observe the 80/20 rule (80 percent questions, and 20 percent is talking).
 - Introduce clients to other lawyers at the firm, associates and partners, including the MP.
 - Get introduced to your targets by other lawyers at the firm, and introduce clients to other clients where there might be value.
- You lawyers shouldn't be afraid of gathering personal information as well. Everything they can learn about the clients can be used as a point of follow-up to building the relationship. This personal connection might be their easiest way in, ahead of the business connection, but the point here is to make a connection.

Once they've made the connection, it's all about following up to move the relationship forward. Have them:

- Send a thank-you e-mail (referring to something they learned from their conversation and listening to them).
 - Send them a personal invitation to join their network on LinkedIn (if your lawyers don't have a LinkedIn profile, they should get one and soon).
 - If they learned of a reason to go deeper either at the event or in follow-up, it's time to go on-site and meet their team. Or take them out for lunch. Schedule a more formal discovery-oriented meeting with other lawyers at the firm and the client.
 - If they didn't learn of a reason to go deeper, simply stay in touch (LinkedIn is by far the easiest way to do this with little or no time and effort).
 - Once they've gone deeper and learned about specific needs, now's the time to suggest services based on those needs. With this approach, it isn't about the pitch.
- So with a little organization on the part of your firm, and a little training for your lawyers ahead of your next client event, you are bound to discover further opportunities to serve your clients and increase revenues.

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Problem: Employers risk entering 'dangerous territory'

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"There might be a honeymoon period of three or four months after accepting a counter-offer, but they may soon find the things that were problematic haven't really changed."

Warren Bongard, president and co-founder of ZSA Legal Recruitment in Toronto, said although firms have a greater desire to pull out all the stops to keep key employees it's not a good idea because the firm knows the individual was prepared to leave.

"You've just told your firm you want to leave and now you're going to accept an offer and you're going to stay. You've shared your betrayals with your partners and what that likely means to them is that whatever they're doing to keep you it may very well be a band-aid rather than a permanent solution."

When a lawyer gives notice, they've crossed the threshold by

displaying a lack of happiness with the current situation, said Bongard.

Although he does know of situations where a counter-offer has worked out, Bongard said it's not the general rule of thumb.

"I do think the general acceptance is that once you've disclosed your desire to leave, get the hell out for lack of a better word and move on."

Bongard said he's noticed that law firms are willing to pay a premium to key people like rainmakers and perhaps a bit less money to service partners who are technically very strong but not key to relationships with the clients of a law firm.

"They're paying a premium to good people to ensure they don't leave, knowing that the market has become much more competitive for talent. It's like a war, mostly because there's fewer superstars."

Warren Smith, managing partner at The Counsel Network in Vancouver, said although there may be temptation for a law firm to extend a counter-offer it is fraught with risk and rarely works out in the long run.

Managing partners would be better off accepting and being gracious when a lawyer is leaving a firm and instead use it as an opportunity to learn why they lost that person, he said.

"Most employers, generally speaking, realize it's often dangerous territory to go into a counter-offer process. My experience from the people I have worked with who've accepted a counter-offer is that the person probably within the next year ends up leaving anyways."

A counter-offer situation, he said, is similar to a marriage that's breaking up where each partner promises to change to make things better.

"Once in a while the change is real and it does happen, but more often than not people are creatures of habit and they invariably revert back to the way things were and it leaves everybody with a bit of a bad taste in their mouths."

When a lawyer decides to leave a firm and then ends up staying because of a counter-offer, it's like the "elephant in the room," explained Smith, with the lawyer wondering why they took the threat of leaving to get a better offer and the firm wondering how loyal the individual is and how closely he or she must be watched in future.

Bongard said a law firm should only make a counter-offer in special circumstances such as when an individual can turn the firm around or save a very important client.

"I do think there are circumstances where it's warranted, but

they are more rare than regular."

If a lawyer gets a counter-offer, Bongard said the individual should think long and hard before accepting. It could be that they just didn't argue or lobby hard enough, or that a change was coming, which is fine, he said.

"They should ask themselves why it took this event to happen, and why it didn't happen before?"

Ohnjec said while counter-offers usually come with a salary increase, lawyers should be aware they might not get an increase during the next wage review.

"The reasons for that could be, 'Well, we did increase your salary when you told us you were leaving,'" he said. "They may also find themselves being passed over for advancement within the firm because it may be the thinking that this person didn't show us complete loyalty before and maybe they're a flight risk."