



LESSONS LEARNED FROM LARGE FIRMS: LAW FIRM ALUMNI PROGRAMS

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It was a beautiful day for a drive on May 27th, as I headed into center city Philadelphia via the Kelly Drive, for a program put on by the Delaware Valley Law Firm Marketing Group. The program, “Terrific Alumni Programs” was presented by Abby Raanan, Alumni Relations Manager at Drinker Biddle, and Rick Unger, Special Counsel, and overseeing alumni relations at Duane Morris.

Before diving into the subject matter, I just wanted to mention that Stradley Ronon Stevens & Young served as host for the meeting, and did an outstanding job indeed. The conference room was perfectly sized, elegantly appointed, and had a breath-taking view. The luncheon provided was prepared by their new event caterer, whose name I regrettably did not get. The varied spread they put out accommodated every taste possibility, and was delicious. Kudos.

I would also be remiss if I didn’t take a moment to compliment marketing consultant Stacy Clark, Esq. Stacy is one of the founding members and current steering committee member of the Delaware Valley Law Firm Marketing Group-- a 500+ member organization dedicated to free local education on the latest trends in law firm marketing. I encourage you to sign up to come to one of the free meetings by going to www.dvlawmarketing.org.

Let’s return to the topic at hand. It’s likely that every one of you belongs to at least one alumni association; law school, college, and high school are typical. In the past decade we’ve seen the strong emergence of a new alumni association; former employees of law firms. This is a strategy which emerged at the largest of firms. For most, it has proven wildly successful. It’s time for mid-size and small law firms to pay attention, and learn how this strategy might be beneficial for them as well.

There are certainly many commonalities among various law firm alumni programs. Upon close inspection it becomes evident that no two programs are exactly the same. And that’s a good thing. Differentiation matters.

Alumni associations are a smart marketing strategy. In order to be successful, a firm cannot “burn bridges” with those who leave. I’ve written many

times about “best practices” for attorney departures. I urge firms not to take departures personally, and to always take the high road in handling voluntary departures. I also urge firms to provide honest feedback to employees, and enable those who do not live up to expectations to leave with dignity. I also firmly believe that staff departures provide firms with opportunities to grow and improve through the use of exit interviews. [Note: if you are interested in reading past articles on any of these aspects of people management, send an email request to lawpractice@pabar.org.]

Failing to treat departing employees properly can have consequences. It can impair a firm’s ability to recruit future talent. It can lower morale of those remaining, and dissolve some of the glue which binds them to the firm. And let’s not forget that we never know where and how we will encounter people from our past. In an industry which is often surprisingly small despite globalization, I am still surprised when attorneys fail to realize that the associate or young partner they treat so shoddily today could be the new Chief Legal Officer at a prized client in the future. Yes, Karma can be cruel, especially to those who treat people callously.

Why do we stay in touch with classmates through alumni associations? You know the simple answer: it’s a network of individuals with whom we have something in common. If we stay in touch, and keep them updated on our accomplishments, we hope to be rewarded in many ways, such as:

- Obtaining business referrals
- Serving their legal needs
- Getting assistance when recruiting talent
- Providing introductions to prospective clients

Law firm alumni associations provide the same benefits, and more. They often

- enhance and extend the firm’s brand
- enhance loyalty of former employees
- cause good talent to return to the firm
- create opportunities to explore mergers and acquisitions
- provide valuable insights and strategic information regarding industry trends impacting firm clients



The actual components of a firm's alumni program will vary. Some firms have large budgets to run their program. That's not necessarily because the firm is large and can afford it. Rather, it's because there's great buy-in. Some firms have a few strong believers who keep programs alive despite little buy-in and very minimal budgeting.

As with so many things in law firm life, a perceived lack of benefit often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. One usually gets out what one puts in to networks. Non-believers are non-participants, which then provides them with no benefit from an alumni group, and further convinces them it doesn't benefit the firm. But those who actively participate often realize great benefit.

Here are some of the common components included in successful alumni association programs:

- Regular newsletters updating members on firm accomplishments, promotions, honors etc
- Social events to foster face-to-face contact
- Free CLE for alumni
- Access to select firm resources
- Facebook page to enable interaction
- LinkedIn member-only discussion group
- Access to job postings not available to the public
- Assistance in locating new job positions
- An alumni directory

This is not a wholly comprehensive list, but hopefully it will give you sufficient food for thought. A lot of these ideas are low cost, and easy to implement.

Keep in mind that former employees will always carry your firm name on their resume, and in their memory. Your firm name will come up in their discussions from time to time. You can influence whether you are mentioned in a positive way, or not.

At a minimum, each of your firms, no matter how small, should try to end all employment relationships on as positive a note as possible. You should try to learn how to improve the employment experience every time one ends. Even if you have



asked someone to leave, it doesn't mean they don't have valuable insights which might help you avoid losing someone in the future who you want to retain.

Keep track of those who leave, and make it easy for them to update you on their future endeavors. Keep them informed about the firm's accomplishments. Just this very minimal effort will no doubt result in some additional business downstream. And will enhance your future recruiting efforts as well. When it comes to the treatment of former employees, you should definitely learn from the big firms.

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