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MANAGEMENT

Working and Networking For A Cause

Make time for the organizations you truly believe in

By Christy Burke

Altruism. Many people pay lip service to it or aspire to do it “one day,” and yet many professionals seem to never quite get around to actually becoming involved. There are so many charities, foundations and volunteer organizations, all of which need guidance, energy and money, so it would seem so easy just to pick one or two causes or organizations you really believe in and then make time for those.

Community Involvement

Community involvement is not so simple for all lawyers, especially because most of them have the specter of billable hours looming over them. To a lawyer, time literally is money. However, it turns out that many lawyers have indeed managed to carve out time from their busy schedules to benefit community organizations. As they tell it, the benefits are many, and the positives far outweigh the negatives. In addition to the satisfaction they

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feel from helping others, lawyers can also benefit from the extraordinary networking opportunities that charitable work affords them.

Relationships with Important Clients

Matt Miller, an attorney with DiscoverReady, a company that outsources document review for Fortune 500 companies, is based in Charlotte, N.C. Miller is on the Board of his local YMCA.

Miller finds the work extremely rewarding and notes that it has allowed him to build relationships with important clients. He explains, “A lot of people get into the law with the idea of helping people, and many lawyers are socially conscious. And with the current economic state, there is a real push by clients to see their lawyers investing in the community. You need to find a cause you’re really attached to — one that you can devote time to — and you can develop fruitful business relationships that way.”

Through his charitable works, Miller was able to forge a relationship with a major financial institution client, and those contacts are still active and important to his work at DiscoverReady.

Member of a Board

Michael R. Bell is a solo practitioner in New York City. He echoes Miller’s sentiment about charitable work allowing you to build relationships with people you wouldn’t otherwise meet or have

occasion to socialize with. For the past two years, Bell has been on the Board of Comprehensive Development Inc., a program that partners with and raises funds for Manhattan Comprehensive Night and Day High School, an institution that educates older and under-credited students.

Bell notes that involvement in a cause is certainly not the place to actively market your legal services. When asked what profession he’s in, he will subtly tell people that he’s a lawyer and will answer their questions, but the networking is much softer when you’re on a board.

According to Bell, “Being on a board gives me certain legitimacy and puts me in a circle I wouldn’t ordinarily be in. At events, I’m not just a stranger — I’m a member of the board. I go out with other board members socially from time to time. Without overtly marketing, I am creating the possibility of opportunity and meeting people who could become clients or could refer clients to me at some point.”

Attorney Dedication

Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice is a multi-office law firm based in North Carolina. Across the firm’s many offices, there is a prevailing dedication to community and civic involvement. Murray Greason is a senior member of the firm who was managing partner for several years. He notes that Womble Carlyle has always maintained a sterling history for community service, and that he believes it’s very important for all attorneys to

dedicate themselves to a cause outside of their legal work.

He explains that civic and charity involvement is particularly important for young lawyers to weave into their schedules. "Since the projects that associates typically work on don't often put them in touch with real problems and opportunities, philanthropic work allows a lawyer to develop him- or herself as a person and as a lawyer while helping out."

When faced with the dilemma of whether to spend more time billing hours or to devote it to nonprofit work, young attorneys in particular are torn because they feel pressure to make their numbers. However, Greason cautions young lawyers about focusing only on legal work. "If you just sit at your desk and grind out billable hours, you won't be a well-rounded person. You'll grind yourself into dust. Get out and do something. When you do, the economy benefits and in the end, the legal market benefits as well."

Kevin Pigott, a Womble attorney based in the firm's Washington, D.C., office, agrees wholeheartedly that lawyers need to be well-rounded, and that it actually helps them attract business if they have more of a work-life balance. He says, "It's good for business to be more balanced. People don't want to get advice from someone who's strapped to a desk. Try to spend 20 percent of your time doing things other than lawyering. Get out and network, go golfing."

To that last point, Pigott hosts an annual golf tournament called The Old School Invitational each year, which raises money to benefit The House, an after-school day

center for at-risk teens in a precarious Washington, D.C., neighborhood. Over the years, the golf tournament has raised over \$100,000 for The House.

Pigott actually asks his clients to participate in the golf tournament and also to donate money to the cause. As he explains, the transactional nature of his practice leaves him as someone more in the nature of a counselor or close adviser to his clients, so the fact that he's involved with the charity actually underscores the role he plays. "I call my clients and ask them to support the charity. I prevail upon them to do something good and something right. Though I'm not doing this to rub shoulders necessarily, I find that it does strengthen my relationships with my clients."

From a branding standpoint, Pigott says that being involved with this golf tournament forms part of his identity with clients and at the firm. They know him as a lawyer, a golfer and a person who raises money for this charity. It helps to set him and his firm apart from other attorneys.

Enriching Your Life

Ranlet S. Bell of Womble Carlyle's Winston-Salem office has had extensive involvement in the community, having been president of the Junior League, among other positions. She has found community involvement has enriched her life tremendously and has led to several referral opportunities within the firm. She remarks, "I've met fascinating people and have received lots of referrals along the

way, many of which have become clients for my colleagues at the firm."

Ms. Bell recommends that attorneys try to find which causes they can get genuinely enthusiastic about. "Try to discover what you want to do versus what you need to do. Find out what excites you so it's not drudgery — you can actually enjoy it."

Through her regular work, she is often in a position to help wealthy people set up private foundations or make gifts to charities, which she finds satisfying. Through her work she also helps people establish charities that address needs in the community as identified by her clients. "There are so many worthy causes, whether you are helping the poor and needy, setting up a school to help autistic children, or funding beautification or the arts. You have to find a balance, keeping your eyes on growing your practice within the firm while also doing things that are personally rewarding to you."

There is clearly no shortage of philanthropic activities that a lawyer can engage in, nor is there a limit to the positive results that can be gleaned from them. Civic and charity work puts you shoulder to shoulder with people who are leaders in the community and in the business world. By investing your time, skills and money in volunteer efforts, you stand to benefit your own morale, while also making and furthering contacts that can be extremely helpful to your legal career, both now and down the road. Altruism doesn't have to be something you do "one day" — it can be something you do "today." ■