

## Women in the Law

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### Beyond the Law: Become A **Business** Ally and Advisor



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**L**AWYERS ARE TRAINED to give legal advice and put their clients' interests first. The best lawyers, particularly women lawyers, provide the value add of serving as mentor, ally and business advisor to their clients and other attorneys with whom they work.

Clients engage an attorney because they need help and seek advice. Clients willing to take advice, and attorneys willing to go beyond providing legal services, can establish long term and beneficial working relationships. How an individual seeks and uses the advice is critical to the outcome of the situation.

Even today, female lawyers have few female mentors and role models. Women realize they need to play in the man's world, use the old boy's network and work twice as hard to prove their

worth. Learning from male colleagues can provide incredible insight into how men think, do deals and run businesses. Transferring these skills and traits to one's own job and using them when advising female clients, can enhance the career of women attorneys and create positive results for female business clients.

Overcoming the additional obstacle of working and succeeding in a male oriented environment creates an opportunity and an obligation for women attorneys to serve as a mentor, ally and advisor not only to other women attorneys but to their clients, particularly their female clients.

By taking the additional steps of providing support to other women attorneys in the area of business generation, and seeking out venues where women are in the majority, the female lawyer can make a difference in her firm and the greater business community. Participation in female business organizations and formal support groups is but one way to accomplish this.

It takes time to build a support network, and building the network is only part of it. The network needs to consist of people whom the members

trust, who can relate to business issues, who have similar experiences and who provide valuable assistance. Assembling such a group is not easy.

Most women find it difficult at various points in their professional lives to ask for help and even more difficult to determine from whom they should seek help. Lawyers are perfectly situated to provide the additional support and can also be the link between their clients and the right business groups.

This article is written from my perspective as a corporate lawyer with a particularly business-oriented focus, and thus the suggestions and examples to follow relate specifically to such skills and client needs. I speak in terms of helping female clients within businesses, both large and small, find connections and expertise in business-related



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areas such as formation of a for-profit company, corporate funding (issuance of corporate debt and equity) and corporate governance by a board of directors.

However, the lesson applies to all lawyers in all practice areas. Becoming involved in organizations in ways that relate to your clients' needs and interests will give you connections you can then pass on to clients when and as the need arises.

But also, all lawyers will do well to remember that all clients, except for individuals, are businesses. Thus, no matter the services you are providing, civil litigation or white-collar or other, at the end of the day those services are being provided to help the client resolve a business problem. Thus, knowing at least some of the business basics will not only stand you in good stead overall, but may help you one day be able to identify and help clients with other business issues or needs outside of your practice area.

### The Role of Groups

Men and women at all stages of their advancement participate in a variety of groups, both informal and formal.

There is nothing "wrong" with females and males being members of the same group. However, as with any diverse group, women entrepreneurs face different challenges than men and as a result have different needs and expectations from a support group. Women-only groups provide a safe harbor for women to express their anxieties inherent in leading their businesses. Women need the ability to present these issues in a neutral setting with peers who have the same desire to succeed.

Female attorneys who have established a strong professional network will be able to provide suggestions on where the women clients can turn for support. The key, as the attorney, is to also have some connection to the suggested organization in order to validate the group and to stay involved with the client.

Identifying groups that are of interest and complement your legal practice is important. You must have a passion for the organization and commitment to be involved in order to make a difference to the organization and to personally get something out of the experience.

It is also important to find an organization where your skill set and legal experience is invaluable to the group as a whole and its constituency. Looking for organizations where you can teach classes on topics such as formation, funding structure, board responsibilities and liabilities is a great way to "spread the wealth of your knowledge."

By being active in an organization, you can:

- obtain visibility in the business community;
- establish yourself as an expert;
- expand your business network;
- provide insight to others; and
- give back to the community.

Leveraging the benefits of becoming involved in outside organizations and "playing it forward" to clients is a win-win result. It could be in the form of knowing what business training an organization offers, knowing who knows whom in the organization and connecting your client with that person. It could be identifying a funding source and knowing the decision maker; or connecting female clients with other female businesses.

Whatever the form, your involvement and experiences with the group are invaluable resources to your clients.

### Make Yourself an Expert

By expanding your network through the business community and establishing yourself as a business advocate, people will view you as an expert and refer possible clients to you. Using your uniqueness as a female attorney who is also willing to mentor and work with female entrepreneurs will bring opportunities to do just that.

Becoming an expert and someone who is willing to help others is especially appealing to women. Creating a network of different types of business advisors creates a support network for business owners. Advice from these key advisors results in positive feedback, constructive support and the ability to make an informed decision.

All of these elements foster and create success and further the growth of a woman's business. The members' needs are met, in a setting where opinions are valued and long lasting alliances are formed. Having a like minded group of lawyers, accountants, funding sources and business owners is like handing success on a silver platter to a business.

By **expanding your network** through the business community and **establishing yourself** as a business advocate, people will view you as an expert and refer possible clients to you. Using your **uniqueness** as a **female attorney** who is also willing to **mentor** and **work with** female **entrepreneurs** will bring opportunities to do just that.

Being a member or leader of an organization will strengthen your existing network and expand your client base. A step-by-step example of how this works:

(1) A business colleague with whom you sit on a board (2) knows of a new female company looking for legal counsel, (3) thinks of you because you sit on a board together, you are a lawyer and work with female entrepreneurs.

(4) You agree to meet with the "possible client" as a favor to your business colleague, and (5) during the meeting you use your network by offering up some introductions to state agencies, funding sources and unique pricing options.

(6) The female business owner divulges the fact that she met with a possible lawyer the day before (even gave him a check). (7) You are gracious and still offer to make introductions, and (8) by the end of the meeting, the potential client is going to call the other lawyer, get her check back and retain you.

End result: a new client, who is happy with the legal representation and value add introductions and opportunities, has now referred several additional potential clients to you. The cycle continues.

### Form a New Organization

Another way to become the "go to" person is to fill a niche in the marketplace by forming an organization or peer group. As the founder of an organization, you can shape it to serve a perceived need of your clients and others female business owners who are potential clients.

The need is identified by observing what is currently being provided (or not) in a specific area or, better yet, by asking clients what they need and then creating the solution to their problem. By being the founder, you can solicit ideas from others as the perceived expert and can reach out to potential clients in a non-legal way. As the leader, you shape the group, keep control and leverage it in ways that best serve your own needs and the needs of the group's members.

Additionally, starting something new establishes you as someone who connects innovative, entrepreneurial and intelligent women business professionals. These are all good attributes to have and good traits to convey to your clients and the business community.

You never know where it might lead. The next great organization can happen in the following way.

1) A lawyer who practices corporate law attends a large industry conference.

2) She notices the small number of women attendees, and 3) talks to the conference organizers who mention they want more female attendees.

4) The lawyer offers to help and be involved in a brainstorming meeting with current female attendees.

5) A breakfast meeting of attendees leads to numerous new contacts (added bonus).

6) The female attendees want "something" focused on women in the industry.

7) The lawyer (because she has formed other networking groups) offers to spearhead the initiative.

8) Using the resources of her firm, she gets the word out and works with conference planners for a joint kick-off event.

9) The conference offers "attendees" a discount if they come to both events.

10) Over 200 women show up; the organization is off and running.

11) E-mails come to the founder asking how they can join; and you as founder compile contact information.

The end result: a national organization with chapters in various cities and an incredible database. The organization is well established and well run, providing quality events, programming and members. Other organizations now want to collaborate.

Having a passion for working and advancing a client's business through the creation or participation in an organization, and thereby facilitating solutions for your client, create long lasting partnerships with your clients and transcend the traditional role of providing legal services. The uniqueness of being a woman attorney in the business world, who has the superior legal skills and who participates in activities to further the development of women in business, will make you a standout in your firm and in the business community.