

**Doing well by doing good:
Law firm social responsibility**

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Corporations increasingly subscribe to the principle of corporate social responsibility. CSR is based on the belief that a demonstration of concern for the environment, human rights, community development and the welfare of their employees can make a corporation more profitable. And if not more profitable, at least a better place to work.

Law firms can learn from corporate experience to create their own social responsibility programs. Such programs can help law firms to do well by doing good. They can strengthen the firm's reputation and market position. They can help the firm identify with the culture and CSR activities of clients and potential clients. They can help lawyers and staff find more meaning in their work and improve as human beings.

In the words of the social responsibility Karma Committee at Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck: "Be kind. Be generous. Be concerned. Donate time. Donate effort. Donate money. Just find a cause and give. You'll quickly discover giving is also receiving."

A panel discussion about how law firms can learn about CSR and introduce some of its elements into their own models was sponsored by the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association (www.legalmarketing.com/rockymountain). The program was held May 8 at Maggiano's Little Italy in downtown Denver.

Panelists included Sarah Hogan, vice president of Barefoot PR (www.barefootpublicrelations.com); Bruce DeBoskey, lawyer and founder of The DeBoskey Group (www.deboskeygroup.com), which focuses on philanthropic advising; Joyce Witte, Community Investment Advisor and director of the Encana Cares Foundation, Encana Oil & Gas (USA) (www.encana.com); and Amy Venturi, director of community relations & karma at Brownstein (www.bhfs.com). Moderator was Cori Plotkin, president of Barefoot PR.

"At law firms, the product is the people – the lawyers and support staff who provide high quality legal services," said Plotkin. "It is an easy fit. There are many ways that this 'product' can contribute time, talent and treasure to socially responsible activities."

Social responsibility: Focus and strategy

Law firm social responsibility is all about making a difference within the community and the profession, and within a firm. Even the best efforts will make no impact if spread too thin. “You cannot maximize the value of your contributions or tell your story if your efforts are too diluted,” said Hogan. To decide how to most effectively invest its resources, a law firm needs a social responsibility focus and a strategy.

“Social responsibility efforts must be authentic,” said DeBoskey. “Law firms and other entities should always avoid ‘green-washing’ – telling a story that is aspirational, but not really true,” said DeBoskey. “Know yourself. Let your firm’s unique culture and skills determine which efforts to pursue and which to avoid.

“When examining your culture, don’t limit yourself to partner input,” said DeBoskey. “Law firms are small communities, almost like families. Any effort to define culture and social responsibility should represent not only the interests of lawyers, but the interests of all levels of support staff. Efforts must be meaningful throughout the firm. The benefits to employee recruitment, retention and satisfaction can be remarkable.”

DeBoskey outlined three types of community involvement and stated his belief that a good social responsibility plan includes elements of all three.

“In a traditional model, an organization ‘gives back’ randomly to the community when asked – as a good citizen, rather than for any strategic purposes,” said DeBoskey. “In a social responsibility model, these efforts align with the capabilities of the business – like the legal skills of lawyers. Every non-profit needs legal advice.

“At it’s most sophisticated, a social responsibility program involves using your core product – legal services – as a tool for social change,” said DeBoskey. “Volunteer with organizations like the Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System at the University of Denver, or the Rocky Mountain Children’s Law Center.”

A strong focus makes it much easier to make decisions. Encana, for example, focuses its charitable giving strategy on issues surrounding its product -- natural gas. Brownstein will donate money only if the request comes from a client, or if one of their attorneys is a member of the organization and on the board.

“Law firms looking for additional advice can find valuable resources within the Corporate Community Investment Network (www.ccin.net),” said Witte. CCIN is an association for professionals whose primary responsibility is to manage community investment programs in a for-profit business setting.

Many corporations and a few law firms have actually created separate foundations to manage some of their giving. A foundation comes with more restrictions and different tax

methods. As entities with a life of their own, however, foundations are more likely than one-off efforts to continue a useful existence.

Social responsibility: Good policies make good decisions

Strategy and focus provide the foundation for an effective social responsibility policy. Most law firms are inundated with requests from good causes asking for their support. A policy helps you know when to say “yes” to and when to say “no.”

“In the law firm model, where all partners are owners with a sense of entitlement to resources, it can be very difficult to say no,” said Hogan. “A keenly focused policy makes it much easier to do so and keep the firm’s efforts on track.”

Encana, for example, uses a five-step tool to determine the level of fit between a request and the company’s strategic goals in the field of natural gas – with level five being the largest commitment and level one the lowest.

Level five efforts integrate core product or service and often involve natural gas vehicles and energy efficiency initiatives using natural gas. These efforts contribute to best practices and leading trends in the industry, while enhancing the company’s reputation as a leader.

Level four efforts focus on strategic partnerships and often involve sustainable and long-term solutions like workforce development initiatives, signature programs (which can be repeated in other markets) and multi-year grants.

Level three efforts include strategic grants to assist with projects, programs or initiatives made to local non-profits aligned with natural gas.

Level two efforts include responsive giving, which is a one-time gift for a broad community effort that has local support. Participation of company representatives is required.

Level one efforts include the “t-shirt and banner” category, which contains one-day items like dinners, receptions, golf tournaments, events and races. These offer the least impact and awareness for the money, and therefore the least support.

At Brownstein, requests made to the firm are judged by two factors. The firm considers only requests made by clients and requests made by organizations where one of its attorneys participates at the board level.

Social responsibility: Engagement

Effective social responsibility programs involve not only checkbook involvement, but personal and professional involvement.

“At Brownstein, our brand has always been about being out in the community,” said Venturi. “Six years ago, I was asked to formalize this essential component of the firm’s culture into a social responsibility program that would further energize lawyers.

“I started by spending 15 minutes with each of the attorneys, to discover their passions – which I used to identify a good non-profit match,” said Venturi. “After all, lawyers and staff will stay involved and do their best only when an organization is something that they care deeply about. If there is no engagement, the placement will backfire.

“Finally, we offer the lawyer’s services to the non-profit in some capacity – but it must be at the board level,” said Venturi. “Otherwise, we won’t make the match.”

Project Karma is a Brownstein program dedicated to volunteer opportunities, and maintains a committee in each of the firm’s 12 offices. It sponsors informal lunch & learn presentations by local non-profits to encourage interest.

The message about active engagement by lawyers and staff must come from the top. “At Brownstein, we make it very clear that the path to partnership for a new attorney is based not only on legal skills, but also on engagement and involvement with the community,” said Venturi.

“It is important to add a community involvement component to lawyer reviews, even if it is only one goal a year,” said Hogan. “That lets the lawyers know that you are serious. The Colorado Supreme Court asks every lawyer in to contribute 50 hours of *pro bono* work each year. Integrating these programs leads to win/win results for the firm.

Not every firm can match the efforts of a large company like Encana or a large law firm like Brownstein. However, there are good matches for firms of every size. Once again, it is all a matter of focus.

“In fact, it is much easier to get five members of a small firm to focus on a strategic initiative than 500 lawyers in a huge firm,” said Hogan. “If a law firm has \$10,000 to donate, that money goes a lot farther and has a lot more impact to one organization than do \$100 donations spread across 100 organizations.”

Smaller law firms can also multiply its impact by partnering with others in an industry, like vendors or clients, to support a particular non-profit.

Social responsibility: Return on investment

Corporations measure the results of their social responsibility programs, and use these results to make decisions on efforts going forward. Law firms should do the same.

“At the end of the year, we use our five-level model (outline above) to analyze our charitable giving,” said Witte. “How much was given at each level? Then we send a form to each non-profit, asking the recipient to evaluate *outcomes* (statistics for what was accomplished), *process* (did our efforts meet the intended audience) and *impact* (what difference did it make).

“We ask recipients to reply within 60 days, and we use this information to calculate return on investment. Those who do not report back are not eligible for further contributions. The non-profits might gripe at first, but they seem to change their minds once they’ve been through the process – finding that it has useful strategic value.”

“It is entirely appropriate to ask a non-profit to document the results they’ve achieved based on your contribution,” said Hogan. “It lets them know that you are truly invested in the organization. They will see you more as partners and engage you differently.”

Most corporations have created and benefited from well-thought-through and strategic social responsibility programs. Law firms are starting to do the same. A program with tight focus and strict guidelines guarantees maximum impact and awareness in exchange for a law firm’s commitment of time, talent and treasure.