

Rainmaking

Building Your Reputation, Part 3: Maximizing Your Involvement in Organizations

SUSAN SALTONSTALL DUNCAN | Becoming active in non-legal organizations, especially by taking a leadership role, is an excellent way to make important contacts and boost your visibility in niche markets. But for ever-busy lawyers, of course, time is typically in short supply. That means you need to use it well by determining up front how you can leverage your participation in a range of groups.

The two previous installments of Rainmaking focused on using articles, presentations, blogs and the media to promote your knowledge to key audiences. This installment, the last of our three-part series, is focused on enhancing your reputation through active involvement in civic, business and industry organizations.

Know What You Want to Achieve through Your Involvement

Becoming active outside your law firm can raise your visibility and provide special opportunities for meeting and networking with people who could be helpful to your career. Some of the organizations in which you can

become involved may have little or no value for business development or professional advancement, but they may hold personal meaning for you. Before you decide how to better leverage your involvement in certain organizations or how you'll select new ones to join, you must first determine what your goal is for that involvement.

In addition to professional and business reasons, you might select an organization for social, political, spiritual or intellectual interest. If your objective specifically is business development or reputation building, however, you need to evaluate carefully which organizations include people in leadership positions who could provide opportunities for referrals and introductions. Some civic organizations more than others will provide opportunities to meet important business leaders. The key is to think carefully about what you hope to achieve by being involved and what the best route to capitalizing on your involvement is.

Be Where Your Clients Are: Leveraging Industry and Business Associations

Business and industry associations can be excellent places to make and renew meaningful contacts or learn more about an industry or market, helping to enhance your reputation in the process. There are hundreds of these associations, however, so the challenge is to find the right one or two on which to focus your time and energy. So how do you select the right organization?

Start by asking clients and referral sources what industry and business organizations they belong to and which they find most useful. There are multiple associations for every segment of every industry, from real estate, banking, biotech and manufacturing on to franchise, trademark and beyond. There are also general business organizations including smaller, local ones like chambers of commerce and the Rotary Club and larger ones like the Association for Corporate Growth, trade organizations and economic development partnerships. Ask others in your firm which organizations they belong to and if you can join them at the next event or conference. Also canvas the organizations your competitors belong to, in case you might be missing something.

Once you have a list of potential organizations, visit their Web sites to look at membership categories, publications, upcoming conferences and the events, trends and themes they



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are addressing as a group. Also, before actually joining an organization, try to attend a few events to make sure there are decision makers or referral sources actively involved and not just a lot of your competitors! You want to be certain that each organization has potential for helping you meet your goals.

So, having done your homework and selected the right group, what do you do once you join it? A good first step is to contact whichever client or referral source is a member of that association and arrange to meet him or her at the next meeting so you can personally be introduced about the room. From there, you want to get actively involved in an important and visible committee or task force and take a leadership role. But you'll have to pay your dues on a few committees before being considered for a board position or other leadership role, of course. The conference and program, strategic planning and legislative action committees are often the most visible or opportunity-laden committees, so see if they have an opening for you.

Also, try to schedule follow-up meetings or luncheons with others you meet at events or who you serve on the same committees as you. And be sure to seek occasions to become visible through speaking and writing and find ways to co-speak or co-author with clients or referral sources. Take other lawyers in your firm to events to introduce them to your contacts and cross-sell their expertise as well.

Using Civic and Charitable Organizations to Raise Your Stature

There are a limitless number of non-business-related organizations and causes in which you could become involved, including the following types:

- Local community groups
- Cultural organizations
- School committees

- Sports activities
- Social causes
- Charities and religious organizations

All of these can provide immense personal satisfaction. But again, if you are evaluating an organization or activity as a marketing strategy, you have to assess these opportunities carefully, since many can become very time-consuming and ultimately may not help you achieve business development results. So you'll want to follow a selection strategy similar to the one you use in selecting business associations.

This means devising a list of all the civic and charitable organizations and activities in which clients, prospects and other influential people are involved. Most communities have a "short list" of key organizations and causes in the area, which often includes the United Way, hospital boards, fundraising walks and events, visual and performing arts institutions, and Boys and Girls Clubs. Review the list and identify general categories in which you have a personal interest,

past involvement or other reason to become involved. (For example, do you have children, or a passion for the arts?) Explore and select one or two activities that you believe will be enjoyable, will fill several objectives for you and your firm, and will provide an opportunity to become involved in a visible leadership role.

Be Sure Your Commitment Is Genuine

Active involvement in organizations can be very rewarding personally and professionally. And certain leadership roles provide not only the opportunity to be visible and network with other important business leaders in the organization but also open doors to business referrals. You must be certain, however, that your interest in and commitment to the organization or the cause is genuine. Otherwise, you will not engender the respect you will need to generate the visibility and credibility you desire. Remember, your time and energy are extremely valuable, so invest them wisely. LP

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