

Women's Bars: Reaching Across the Generations

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To remain successful, a women's bar association must constantly strive to develop and maintain a diverse membership base. In order to provide a strong network, effective programs and nimble responses to the issues of the day, the organization must be able to turn to just the right person at just the right time: the government lawyer in the Capitol who understands the intricacies of the most arcane administrative rules, the new mother able to assist peers in juggling the responsibilities of parenting while advancing a legal career, the judge who knows what it takes to win an election, or the woman of color who can share strategies for success in the face of subtle discrimination. But perhaps the most difficult task in developing and maintaining a diverse membership is in meeting the needs of lawyers of different generations. Women's bar associations need the dynamism and fresh perspectives of new lawyers and the depth of experience and wisdom of older lawyers. Be honest: have you heard complaints from lawyers in each of these groups within your own organization? *Those new lawyers are totally unprofessional! They expect everything to be handed to them on a silver platter. Those old lawyers are still whining about perceived slights that happened decades ago!* Feelings are hurt, opportunities for understanding are missed, and dues are not renewed, all to the detriment of your women's bar group.

The ultimate question your members are asking when it is time to renew is "What's in it for me?" They want to be valued, supported and respected. They all want their viewpoints to be heard. They also want a range of programs and services from which to choose which will be of value to them at various stages of their lives and careers. These services and programs will necessarily change with time. It is up to us to pay attention to their changing needs.

So how can a women's bar organization serve members of varying ages and stages in their careers?

Set a welcoming tone

The best intentions will be sabotaged if members are greeted indifferently by staff, if board members ignore new faces at networking events or if inquiries to committee chairs remain unanswered. Remembered kindnesses and slights persist for years. Take a look at your newsletters and panelists. Are they always the "usual suspects?" Make a point of ensuring that members of varying ages are represented.

Create pathways to participation

For every program and service offered by your group, brainstorm about potential barriers to participation your members may face. Will the cost be too much? Some groups offer discounts to new lawyers, but lawyers with more years in practice may also be faced with financial difficulties. Consider low-cost ways to add more free events or services. How about a sliding scale based on individual income? How about a clearly defined volunteer position which leads to free attendance? Is there a way of adding a free CLE just before a higher-cost event? Will transportation be a barrier for some? Help to facilitate car pooling. Hold events in locations which are accessible by public transportation. Involve a women's bar leader in a distant community who is willing to recruit colleagues to travel together to a statewide event. Would a

webinar or phone conference be a workable option? How about childcare? Is there a nearby facility which could offer drop-in care? Is the timing of the event suitable for solo practitioners in distant suburbs, working parents or those with busy trial schedules? The very fact that your membership has diverse needs means that you will not be able to overcome all the obstacles. But by critically analyzing them each time you plan an event or service, you will solve some problems and, at the very least, have a better appreciation of the barriers faced by your members.

Identify and nurture new leaders

Make it easy for new members to become involved in the leadership of your women's bar group. Which of your committees afford opportunities for new attorneys? Perhaps the content of a CLE program may be best planned by an experienced practitioner, but the nuts and bolts of event planning can be done by anyone who is conscientious and attentive to detail. Make the process for becoming a board member of your women's bar group transparent: publicize selection criteria and expectations. Ensure that the criteria fit the needs of your organization rather than simply conforming to outdated notions of the need for a certain number of years of membership or practice. Be explicit about how leaders are created. Click [here](#) for information on Mississippi Women Lawyers Association's Second Annual MWLA Day of Leadership.

Value and cultivate old leaders

What happens when your board members' terms end? Do they stay involved with the organization? Perhaps a past board member may chair the committee of her favorite project. Would an advisory board work for your group? How about an annual social for past board members hosted by the current board? What events and services of your women's bar association are of value to well-established practitioners? A speaker's bureau can provide a service to the public as well as an opportunity to showcase the expertise of individual women lawyers. Click [here](#) to learn about Minnesota Women Lawyers' President's Leadership Circle.

The [American Bar Association's Division for Bar Services](#) has a wealth of information for bar organizations, including archived articles addressing the needs of new and senior attorneys. Check the March-April 2009 issue of [Bar Leader](#) for an article about generational communication.

A women's bar association cannot afford to be perceived as just a stopping place for new lawyers to network until they are established or just an "old girls club" for long-time friends to chat with one another. Your group will thrive by paying attention to the needs of all the generations in the legal profession.