

Engaging Older Members

By Diane Rynerson

Most bar associations today are struggling to maintain membership, and women's bar groups are no exception. Since the publication of *Bowling Alone* in 2000, there has been a general awareness of the decline in social engagement. We can take comfort in the fact that this is all part of a larger social phenomenon, but that doesn't help with the need to take practical steps to stem the loss of members in our own associations. One way to assess the various needs of your membership is to borrow the business concept of market segmentation. Think of the various groups that make up your membership, and focus on each separately, while being aware of the fact that it is unlikely that any individual member will fit exclusively into one category. Membership segments could include corporate counsel, government attorneys, new parents, law students, or any other category that you can identify.

The focus of this article is on "older members." Depending again on segmentation, this category could encompass people who are at the height of successful legal careers, people who have largely left the day-to-day practice of law, and retirees. It could encompass people who are decades apart in age. The needs of each of these subgroups must be examined separately to answer the question posed by so many women's bar groups: Why do older members drop out? The first step is to take a look at what you are offering. To simplify, let's say that you have monthly luncheons at a downtown location, an active Facebook page, an online member directory, a members-only listserv, an annual gala, and two longer CLE programs each year. It might be tempting to send out a quick survey asking members how important each of those programs or services is to them, but that wouldn't allow you to delve deeply enough to get to the underlying reasons individuals retain membership. To do that, try asking people directly. At their core, women's bar associations are about forging and maintaining relationships. There isn't a single member benefit which outweighs this. When I was a newer lawyer, I served on the board of my local women's bar association. Only a few older women attorneys attended our monthly luncheons. By reaching out individually to a few older women lawyers, we learned that some of them still were very much in touch with one another although they no longer felt any real connection to the organization in which they had previously been very much involved. The relationships that had been created by participation in the organization remained.

"I Won't Know Anyone"

As an older lawyer myself, I've asked many of my peers about why they retain membership in a women's bar association. One answer, particularly by those who may have played past leadership roles, refers to the sociological importance of supporting women lawyers. Others say they retain their membership only because the listserv is useful and keeps them connected. When asked why they don't attend in-person programs, the most frequent answer is "I won't know anyone." That is an answer we might expect to hear from a newer lawyer and may be surprising to hear from someone with many decades of experience in the local legal community. But therein lies the problem. The newer lawyer knows that she will have to work hard to make connections. And even though she is a newer lawyer, perhaps there are others present from her law school class who will make her feel less alone. Unless the older lawyer has achieved prominence, she will be approached less often by other lawyers and may find it difficult to inject herself into already-existing conversation circles. Because she is no longer trying to build a practice or find a new job, she doesn't see the value in working hard to make new connections and spares herself the embarrassment of

future encounters by no longer attending in-person events. Making the older member welcome at an event requires many of the same approaches as making any member feel welcome, but it does require focused effort. Reach out to potential attendees in advance to encourage them to come. Invite them to sit at your table. Assign board or committee members who are not already burdened with multiple duties to act as greeters and connectors, introducing attendees to one another. If you have an advance registration list, make sure you know something about each of the attendees. Consider asking a more seasoned attorney to sit at the registration table. She may be more likely than student volunteers to be able to greet the older lawyer by name. Remember that the registration table is the place where your members get their first impression of any event.

"I Don't Need the Women's Bar Association at this Stage of My Career"

A frustrating reason given by older women lawyers for letting their membership lapse is that they simply no longer need what a women's bar association offers. Women's bar associations are known as great places to get leadership experience and meet colleagues in various practice areas. Once a lawyer is established and her leadership skills are sought after in other associations, she may feel there is no point in continuing her membership. As a practical matter, she may not be aware that her continued involvement, even if somewhat minimal, may be adding to the number of referrals she receives from other attorneys. Although a lawyer may have a great reputation in a particular practice area, her name may not immediately come to mind when another lawyer is making a referral unless she is listed in a searchable membership directory or attends meetings with some regularity. Even when this isn't a consideration, appealing for the need to "pay it forward" is sometimes effective. It is awkward when a prominent woman lawyer or judge is not a member of the local women's bar association. Sometimes you must explicitly say that the organization needs that particular individual's membership. It is also possible that "I don't need the women's bar association" is just a way of saying that the current offerings aren't meeting that lawyer's needs.

"I Don't Need the MCLE Credit"

This is an excuse sometimes offered by older lawyers who let their memberships lapse or who don't want to attend in-person meetings, but it is one which can easily be countered with validation and re-direction. ("I don't either, but the speaker is great, there is going to be a reception afterwards, and it would be fun to see you." Or, "I know, but the listserv is worth the price of membership.") I don't know of any women's bar association whose primary purpose is to produce CLE programming, yet sometimes a member will seize upon this one membership benefit as the reason that membership is not of value to them.

Meeting Your Members' Needs

When comparing your association's current offerings to the needs of each subgroup of older lawyers, think about how you might make small adjustments. Do you use easy-to-read nametags at in-person events? Do you use a microphone at events rather than just assuming that everyone can hear? When possible, do you reduce ambient background noise? Do you make introductions each time you meet in small groups to refresh everyone's recollections? Do you have a sliding-fee membership scale based on individual income or have a specific category for retirees? Is information on membership renewal easily accessible, or do members need to remember a password in order to find out basic information? Do you have an option for

payment by check?

Once you have reviewed your current offerings in the context of each membership subgroup, think about any other program or service that might meet the needs of the older lawyer. The area that comes to mind first for many is mentoring, but be careful with this. Simply matching an older lawyer with a younger lawyer is not the basis for a successful mentorship program for any number of reasons. ([See, for example, the extensive research and writing of Ida Abbott on mentoring.](#)) How about starting a networking group for members who have been in practice for 20 or more years? If you don't already have a history committee, consider asking older members to help establish one to preserve the history of the organization and individual women lawyers and judges. Look for specific volunteer opportunities for older lawyers and extend an invitation. Could they host a roundtable discussion? Ask older lawyers for their ideas. Even those who don't offer any suggestions will likely appreciate having been asked. [Click here](#) for a brief article on engaging retiree members.

Even when you create new programs or services specifically for older lawyers, your ultimate goal is to integrate them fully within your association. [Research shows that the most effective organizations are those which value involvement from several generations.](#) Taking some time now to ensure that you are doing your best to meet the needs of your older members will strengthen your organization both in numbers and in depth of experience.



