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Do Well and Do Good: How to Incorporate Community Service in Your Legal Marketing Strategy

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Even for lawyers, the recognition received for community service is one of the keys for living a happier and balanced life. In a recent Gallup study, people who were acknowledged for their efforts in the community score 13% higher on happiness indexes than those who did not. Regardless of where you are in your legal career, becoming invested in your local community is a critical step for building personal visibility and future business opportunities for your practice. For both new and experienced lawyers, participating in community organizations can broaden your network, your reach, and your name.

As a legal marketing professional, one of the issues I often run into with attorneys who have never involved themselves in community service before is: How do I start?

Fortunately, there are opportunities all around you to make a positive impact. Outside of the legal community, there are countless non-profits, schools, and community groups that would love the participation and insight of legal industry professionals. As there are so many options, the important thing is to choose a cause that you like and one that will allow you to connect with audience who you can help (both personally and professionally). In this regard, do not be afraid to vet a number of different organizations before settling into one that can become your life's passion.

Here are a few questions to ask yourself when deciding when and how to get involved in community service to support both your personal brand and your law practice business development goals:

What Do You Like?

First things first, start in your own backyard. What are the areas that you are already interested in? Take a minute and reflect on the things you have been most passionate about during your life and find ways to connect them with your practice area. For instance, were you in debate in high school? Being involved in the local Toastmasters Guild or judging a high school debate tournament might be a good fit. Do you love architecture? The local historical society could benefit from your perspective as a board member. Bottomline is that the more passionate you are about the cause, the more likely you will be to follow through and make an impact.

What are Your Business Development Goals?

The second thing you have to consider is how your community service will connect with your professional business development goals. I have often helped lawyer clients find non-profit organizations to engage with that fit with their marketing strategy and personal brand. A great example is a family law attorney that was interested in engaging in community service that would help them both personally and professionally. They ended up connecting with a children-centric non-profit in their area that fueled their desire to support family health and put them in a position to offer legal help that turned into professional business referrals down the road. The firm was also able to promote their sponsorship and participation with the non-profit on its website and incorporate updates on the non-profit's success in its social media strategy. The main takeaway is this: Don't just find an



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organization, find a cause that aligns with your legal practice.

What Do You Offer?

Legal skills are different from leadership skills. It is a good idea to consider the specific types of service you are willing to offer and where your strengths lie. Perhaps you are great with people, but do not necessarily love managing daily tasks. So instead of volunteering to work on smaller projects within the organization, you can offer strategic mentorship for other leaders. Make a list of the characteristics you have that might benefit an organization (i.e. accounting, networking, collaboration, public speaking) and then be prepared to “pitch” those skills to your future community service organization and suggest places you might be able to serve their board or their audience. There are many high-impact boards available in nearly every large city that provide countless opportunities for lawyer business development. The point is that, if you want to serve on a powerful board in your community, the competition is high. You will need to take stock of your strengths and what you bring to the table before you contact them to apply.

What Are You Willing to Do?

In many service organizations, it is often the most flexible people who rise to the top. Board membership and community service offer a neat opportunity for lawyers to be outside of their box. You can learn a lot through volunteering including organizational management, long-term planning, and navigating employment issues. As a potential volunteer in an organization, you have to consider how engaged you are willing to be. For example, serving on a nonprofit board might augment your skillset to involve fundraising tactics, digital marketing, or even financial planning. Serving as an organizer for a community event might require you to navigate opposing parties where, instead of one side winning, everyone must leave feeling validated. My advice is to be open as volunteer opportunities and community service are ways to develop yourself as a leader in addition to being a lawyer.

Where is Your Line in the Sand?

As wonderful as community service and volunteerism is, it takes time away from your legal practice and possibly your billable hours. It is vital that you have an idea of exactly how many hours you are willing to spend on your philanthropic projects and what exactly you are willing to do for free. No matter how good the intentions of a community service organization, advice given on a *pro bono* basis can often lead to larger requests for help and professional representation. Know exactly what your line in the sand is, i.e. what you are willing to do as a volunteer and make a list of questions that you need answered from the organization before you meet the administration and tour it. As we cannot see around the corner, be sure that their organization is healthy. Remember you are interviewing them as much as they are interviewing you.

What Is the Long-Term Impact You Want to Make?

Although volunteering is a good start, you may be more interested in enacting lasting change on the community you live and work in. Ask yourself what the best possible outcome is for you when involving yourself in community service. Perhaps your long-term goal is to be the Chair of a local charity board or create a reading program for at-risk students. Whatever your dream is for making changes in your community, create a map for how to make that happen and write it down. You may find that volunteering for task forces, participating in event organization, and applying for board membership are the simple, step-by-step ways to reach the community impact you are ultimately looking for.

To conclude, community service works for attorney business development if you do it thoughtfully and intentionally. Board memberships and impactful volunteer opportunities can be a huge part of building a network for yourself and a successful career in law. As a lawyer, the more you invest your time, energy, and talents into supporting causes you are passionate about, the stronger your legacy will be—both professionally and personally.

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