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Networking for attorneys more than parties

Social media sites help, as does self-promotion

March 23, 2010 | By Ameet Sachdev, Tribune Reporter

If the recession taught lawyers anything, it is the value of business development.

Those with large books of business or long-standing relationships with clients were more admired as corporate firms faced a downturn in legal work. The cocoon that protected lawyers respected for their critical thinking but with few business contacts was shattered.

Standing out and connecting with more people inside and outside a firm is more critical in today's stagnant economy, said Ari Kaplan, 37, a McDermott Will & Emery associate turned author and consultant. He gives advice to lawyers and law students on how to be more effective networkers beyond attending cocktail parties and collecting business cards. Kaplan will be speaking Thursday at the American Bar Association's Techshow in Chicago.

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The trick is keeping in touch with people after a successful introduction, Kaplan said. Technology, including social media tools, makes that a lot easier and allows for deeper connections that may help with a job search or a promotion.

For example, if a law firm associate would like to work for a partner, Kaplan suggests setting up a Google alert for the partner. If news comes out that the partner has won a trial or advised on a big merger, drop the partner a congratulatory e-mail.

If an associate would like to work for a corporate legal department, he proposes writing an article about a legal trend that affects that company and quotes the general counsel. It's better than making a cold call to a general counsel, Kaplan said, and the in-house lawyer gets something out of the relationship too.

"People think self-promotion is about yourself," Kaplan said. "It has nothing to do with promoting yourself. It's about promoting others and let that speak for your character. That's my philosophy."

Supporting legal aid: The Chicago Bar Foundation is in the homestretch of its fourth annual fundraiser to support groups that provide legal services to the poor. The monthlong event that kicked off March 1 has attracted 78 law firms, corporate legal departments and other organizations that seek donations from their attorneys and staff.

Financial support from the legal profession is more critical than ever because demand for legal aid is rising, but public funding is dwindling. Illinois cut legal aid funding by 50 percent in 2009, to \$1.75 million, said Bob Glaves, director of the Chicago Bar Foundation.

Another source of funding, the Lawyers Trust Fund of Illinois, which pools the interest collected on client trust funds, has reduced charitable donations by 35 percent in its current fiscal year because of persistently low interest rates, he said.

With increased participation this year and a better economic climate, the foundation hopes to raise more than last year's contributions of about \$900,000. Sidley Austin's Charles Douglas is the chair of the 2010 campaign.

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