

Showing the Way: A How-to Guide to Launching a Successful Women's Initiative, *as appeared in the December 2008-February 2009 issue of Women Legal Magazine*

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In recent years, the traditionally male-dominated law firm environment has often come under attack for the lack of influential professional networks available to the rapidly expanding contingent of women now working in the profession. In an environment where making a profit is key and all attorneys are expected to contribute to the firm's success and growth, this lack of networking and client relationship enhancing opportunities available to women lawyers has been cited, in recent reports issued by the National Association of Women Lawyers, as a catalyst to the exclusion of women from partnership status and participation in firm governance.

At the US law firm Epstein Becker & Green (Epstein Becker Green) we sought to address this through the creation of a women's initiative in 2002, which helped to level the playing field and, thus, directly benefit our firm's business — a move paralleled at a growing number of firms around the US in recent years.

The establishment of Epstein Becker Green's Women's Initiative stemmed from two specific phenomena:

1. Women attorneys represented 45 per cent of the firm's workforce, but they did not participate in the governance of the firm or share in the highest levels of compensation; and,
2. The number of women occupying positions of leadership and influence in the firm's client base continued to grow.

People



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Since its launch, the initiative has provided our women with business development training and many opportunities to meet new clients. Our sponsored events have received overwhelmingly positive feedback from attendees. This, in turn, helped recruitment at the firm, with women joining citing our reputation as a good place for women to work as an important factor in their decision to practice with us. Thus Epstein Becker Green has experienced first-hand how a women's initiative can produce a demonstrated return on investment — by enhancing attorney relationships and the firm's reputation and revenue as a whole.

A well designed women's initiative that includes business development as its focus can enable women to develop their skills as business generators, and then supply opportunities to create new client relationships. When women attorneys are successful at rainmaking, they are more likely to be appointed to executive committees and take on leadership roles.

Based on my own years of experience with, and observations of, women's initiatives, I've outlined below some practical guidance on how your firm can prepare the groundwork to launch a successful, business-oriented women's initiative.

Creating a women's initiative

Whatever form your women's initiative ultimately takes, it should start with the following five basic factors:

1. **Commitment.** A female-focused programme begins, of course, with women - they must perceive a need for such a programme to justify the work required to create and maintain it effectively. If the women at your firm lack commitment, or are lukewarm to the concept, then the initiative will fail. But if the majority are enthusiastic, it's time to forge ahead;
2. **Feedback.** The needs of women lawyers vary, just as law firms themselves vary, so initiatives are not all the same. To set up a successful programme, you must properly tailor it. Survey female members of staff to learn their career priorities, needs and the expectations they have of the firm. Their concerns and priorities will help to shape the goals of the initiative;
3. **External and internal focuses.** A women's initiative should be multifaceted and multi-layered. That means it should have both an external focus (it should offer activities and events that give women lawyers the opportunities to develop relationships and to showcase their talents outside the firm, for example) and an internal focus (it should provide the resources to enhance the women lawyers' leadership and business development skills, for example);

4. A business plan. A women's initiative should primarily aim at improving the law firm's bottom-line, so it is essential to prepare and gain firm-wide support for a well-conceived, formal business plan. This plan should include:

A mission statement — clearly articulate in a mission statement the purpose and the goals of your programme, such as strengthening business development and leadership skills, providing business development opportunities, and promoting women lawyers inside and outside the firm. Keep in mind that the goals of your initiative must be consistent with your firm's strategic goals;

The organisational structure — a women's initiative is typically run by a core group of senior women in the firm or as part of a firm's existing diversity initiative. If your firm has multiple offices, consider having a centralised group at the firm's headquarters and smaller groups in each office who will communicate with all of the other groups. The central group will then decide which programmes the initiative will provide or sponsor, inaugurate internal networking opportunities, and determine budgetary parameters;

Benchmarks — indicate the benchmarks for how success of the initiative will be measured. Will success be determined by the addition of a certain number of new women partners? By placing a set number of women in the firm's executive committees? Or by bringing in a minimum number of new clients?

5. Leadership support. The firm's leadership must approve the business plan and also provide ongoing support

- financial and otherwise.

Putting business development goals into practice

Once your women's initiative has been created, don't let it become a victim of good intentions that never come to fruition. Conceptualising brilliant ideas and setting laudable goals aren't enough. To be credible the initiative must efficiently move forwards and take tangible actions to implement those ideas and attain those goals. To do so, it should embark on the following three programmes: mentoring, networking, and marketing/self-promotion.

Mentoring

This is key to the professional development of women lawyers. People fortunate enough to have good mentors often receive more promotions, better pay and higher career satisfaction. Mentoring enables junior lawyers to learn important leadership, coping and rainmaking skills from the experiences of those senior to them. Mentors also offer guidance, advice and support to help

junior lawyers assimilate into the firm and advance their careers. A good mentor will track the progress of the mentee's work, suggest improvements when necessary, and teach the mentee the skills necessary to become a mentor to future generations.

Mentoring programmes take many forms. It is important to examine alternatives to determine which form will work best at your firm. Consider the following questions when choosing a mentoring programme:

Will the programme be available only to first-year associates or all associates and new partners?

Will the programme pair a junior lawyer with only one senior lawyer or with an entire mentoring group comprised of lawyers at differing levels of seniority?

Will mentors be comprised of only women lawyers or both women and men?

Will mentors change during the course of the mentee's career, as her needs and demands change?

Additionally, mentors should be encouraged to include women lawyers in client meetings and transactions to facilitate relationships between the clients and the women lawyers.

Networking

Cultivating networks of business associates and acquaintances is crucial to business development. Thus, the women's initiative should run networking events: both internally (a lunch for women lawyers within the firm to get to know each other, share strategies for success, and learn basic networking skills) and externally (social events that bring together women lawyers with current and prospective clients). Bear in mind also that women's initiatives from several law firms can join together to sponsor a networking event.

Above all, networking events should be enjoyable and enable attendees to become acquainted in an informal way. For instance, cooking classes, golf outings and fashion shows are popular. Alternatively you could choose events — such as a self-defense class — that will enable attendees to learn a new skill that can benefit them in both their personal and professional lives.

Networking does pay off. Colleagues at Epstein Becker Green report that our own Women's Initiative's networking events played a key role in helping them grow their practice — and thus the firm's. By attending such events, our women lawyers met potential clients and forged relationships that have created mutually beneficial opportunities for the female professional and the lawyer.

Marketing/self-promotion.

Marketing or rainmaking techniques don't come naturally to many women. They feel uncomfortable 'tooting their own horn', and fear that broadcasting their achievements could be viewed by men as being overly aggressive. However, through professional skill-building workshops and seminars, an initiative can train women to tap into their uniqueness as women and to join with other professional women to create success. It can also encourage them to write articles, speak at conferences, identify women-owned businesses that might become potential clients, and teach other important marketing and rainmaking skills.

Whichever forms of business development-focused programmes are put in place, be aware that client relationships and trust are built through consistent and focused interaction over time. The women's initiative should advise the firm's leadership that it would be unwise to expect immediate returns from such programmes. While strategic goal-setting is important for focus and direction, a firm should not lose sight of the fact that a women's initiative is an investment in the firm's future.

Confronting work/life issues and criticism

As a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Workplace Center report¹ points out, the attrition rate of women attorneys is far higher than that of their male counterparts. According to the report, the inability to balance work and family demands often result in women becoming disenchanted with their practice, and, ultimately leaving the legal profession. Many women's initiatives seek solutions to work/life balancing problems by advocating the adoption of family-friendly policies — such as family leave time, flexible or part-time hours, non-standard hours (for example, 7 a.m. to 3 p.m.), on-site child care, seminars on child care and elder care — so that women lawyers will be more inclined to remain with the firm and contribute to the firm's success.

Your women's initiative may, frankly, meet with male and female skepticism. Some men may see the initiative as merely a 'tea party' at the firm's expense or worry that women lawyers are seeking unfair, special treatment. Women, too, may view it as exclusionary. To counter such concerns and obtain everyone's support, it is important to point to the business plan for the initiative: when women generate new clients, everyone at the firm benefits. Moreover, by providing a forum to showcase the firm and its diversity, the firm's reputation and value in the marketplace will increase.

Publicising and monitoring the women's initiatives' actions

A women's initiative must gain exposure for its efforts and activities to capitalise on the firm's investment. Several law firm departments, such as marketing, professional development and human resources, can help. Good sources of publicity include press releases, diversity brochures, and one or more pages on your firm's website that supply information about the women's initiative and highlights past and upcoming events. For example, at Epstein Becker Green we have devoted several pages of the website to our women's initiative. A webpage can not only keep your women lawyers informed about the happenings of the Women's Initiative, but also help your firm attract more women lawyers.

Nonetheless, there are other ways to publicise your female-friendly policies and programmes. For example, our women's initiative recently started a blog (<http://www.executivewomennetworkingblog.com>) to discuss issues important to professional women.

Finally, keep in mind that a women's initiative is a work in progress. Results should be vigilantly monitored to ensure that it is achieving the level of success required by the business plan. Make appropriate adjustments or, if necessary, substantially overhaul the initiative if results are below expectations. If the initiative is well planned, has support and is monitored, it will be an effective tool for women at your firm and will reap dividends in your marketplace.

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References

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