

[Looking for Business with the Right Outside Organization](#)

By [Sally J. Schmidt](#) | Sep.22.14 | [Daily Dispatch](#), [Legal Marketing](#), [Play to Win](#)



Recently, one of my clients attended a public utilities association meeting. It's an industry in which he has both a client and an interest. When I asked how things went, he marveled that there were no other lawyers in attendance (although there was a law firm sponsor that had no representatives at the meeting — a topic for a future post).

Everyone emphasizes the need for lawyers to get out of the office and meet people, often through outside activities. Unfortunately, many lawyers expend their time and energy in associations that offer little business development potential. Don't get me wrong; if your goal is to make a contribution to a cause in which you are interested, more power to you. But if you are getting active with an eye toward business development or marketing, the thought process is different.

How can you use your time outside the firm most effectively for business development? Here are some thoughts.

1. Selecting an Organization

First, if you are planning to invest time in an organization, you want to be sure it is comprised of the right people and offers you good opportunities. You should consider these things:

- **Composition of the membership.** For example, are they decision-makers for the type of legal work handled by you or your firm? At a minimum, you want to be sure their companies or entities are either users of your services or potential conduits to clients (i.e., referral sources). Are the members somewhat proximate in terms of age? It will be easier and more valuable for you to spend time with contemporaries. How many members are there? You want to have a fair chance at building relationships.
- **Personal interest.** Do you care about the industry or the organization's mission? If not, you will not project enthusiasm and will be less inclined to carve out the time needed to make an impact.
- **Time requirement.** It's important to factor in how much time your contributions would require, and when they would happen. For example, if you have difficulty committing to evening functions, you may need to focus on a group that meets over the lunch hour.
- **Ability to interact and participate.** Some organizations put lawyers and other service providers or vendors in special membership categories (e.g., "associate"). That doesn't always mean you can't take full advantage of the group, but it may limit access to some committees or meetings.

If you are unfamiliar with the organizations in your area of interest, ask a client for recommendations and perhaps even a chance to tag along to a future meeting. In addition, you may have a colleague who has experience with the group and can offer advice or an introduction. Finally, a simple Google search can reveal many possible opportunities.

2. Getting Involved

Once you join a group, it is essential that you make a contribution. If you are not planning to be active, don't bother joining. Lots of organizations offer many good opportunities for involvement, depending on your interests. Here are examples:

- **Committees.** The education committee will allow you to help organize the meetings, reach out to speakers and sponsors and potentially introduce presenters. The membership committee will have you contact new people with a similar affinity and sell them on the idea of joining the association. A fundraising committee will mean reaching out to contacts to raise funds for the group — possibly the greatest perceived value of all. You might even consider joining a committee to strengthen your skills (e.g., finance or sales).
- **Special projects and events.** Helping organize a visible and well-executed activity, like a charity ball or golf outing, can raise your profile in the group and put you in touch with many new contacts. You might even be able to propose leading a new project that doesn't yet exist, such as a member survey.
- **Legal/Pro bono work.** You can offer to prepare the new executive director's contract or review the organization's lease renewal. This will give you a chance to showcase your legal skills and add value.
- **Editorial board.** If you like to write, this can be a good way to communicate with other members about topics of interest to them and demonstrate your knowledge.
- **Speaking.** Even without a leadership position, you may be able to get in front of the group with a presentation on a subject of interest.
- **Board of directors.** Getting on the board may take a while and there is certain to be a "track." Ultimately, though, you should set your sights on being part of the organization's leadership team if possible.

As you think about what your contribution might be, don't be afraid to express your interests to the powers that be. And remember: The more active you are, the easier it will be to network and meet people.

I recall a law firm that was targeting the technology industry and had identified a local association that presented the perfect opportunity to meet the market. Yet whenever it came time for a meeting, the lawyers would draw straws to determine who would have to go spend time with "all those engineers." When I say you need a sincere interest, I mean it. Your time is valuable, and it should be spent supporting something you enjoy.

As you explore your opportunities, a few additional dos and don'ts:

- Don't spread yourself too thin. Joining multiple associations often means you are diffusing your attention and potential to make a contribution.
- Do target. You shouldn't be afraid to try a few groups on for size before deciding whether something is worth your investment. Attend meetings as a nonmember to check them out.
- Don't expect to get something without giving something. People who are in an organization just for the business potential are easily spotted (and often shunned).