

**DIVERSITY**|IN ACTION

## Is It Worth It?

Will sponsoring a **minority bar association** event **pay off** for a firm?

**BY KATHERINE FRINK-HAMLETT**

**I** am a hiring partner resident in a New York-metro area office of a national law firm. Recently, one of the African-American senior associates in my office approached me to discuss sponsoring an event with a minority bar association. While I am generally supportive of these types of associations, I am not entirely convinced that the firm's resources should be allocated to this activity. First, our track record for diversity hiring and retention has improved substantially over the past five years. As a result, our diversity numbers are up significantly at both the junior and senior levels. The senior associate suggested that the firm's sponsorship is as much related to business development as it is to diversity recruitment, yet I am not persuaded and, frankly, am somewhat doubtful that the connection is there. What is the real value to a firm if it chooses to sponsor minority bar association functions?

Cast your doubts to the wind. With corporate clients' demands continually changing and frequently increasing,

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law firms not only have to enhance the value of legal services delivered to existing clients, but also need to seek out new horizons for untapped business opportunities. Sponsorship of minority bar association events offers tremendous potential as it relates to both business development and recruitment.

Without minimizing the long-term recruitment value, in my professional opinion and based upon the experiences of partners I have spoken with, the business development benefits are equal, if not paramount, to the recruitment aspects. Indeed, these are truly exciting times for firms to tap into the wealth of opportunities that can result from sponsorship of so-called "minority" bar association functions. Given your diversity successes, your firm is particularly poised to reap the benefits available at these functions. However, as with any activity with specified objectives, a firm's overall success at these events requires clear strategic planning, concise, articulated goals, and systematic and consistent follow up.

The following scenario illustrates how one firm's minority bar association sponsorship led to business relationships with Fortune 500 clients.



Armed with a clear sense of its practice area strengths, a major national law firm decided to sponsor a panel discussion hosted by a well-known minority bar association. Two critical points: first, the firm identified a panel discussion that featured a topic area in which it had considerable expertise;

second, the firm chose a minority bar association in which one of its highly-regarded senior associates was a member. This synergistic approach created an important dynamic, since there was a clear connection between the firm's legal practice and the bar association event.

The primary focus of the sponsored event was a panel of corporate experts addressing the heightened concern of the regulatory environment, particularly as it pertains to the Sarbanes-Oxley Act and related SEC regulations. The sponsoring firm offered a panel of experienced white and non-white attorneys as speakers. Informational materials and

related items prepared by the firm were distributed during the event. Significant information was shared between speakers and attendees during a question and answer period. An informal reception followed.

The immediate result: the firm was viewed as not only a supporter of a key minority bar association, but also as a resource with a diverse talent pool of regulatory experts.

Next, members of the firm, along with the panel participants, began an aggressive follow-up with specific focus on the corporate attendees. Telephone calls were made, thank you notes and inquiries were mailed and follow-up meetings were scheduled. The long-term result: the firm generated two new corporate clients, the first month's billings of which more than exceeded the firm's sponsorship expenses. By the way, the senior associate who first suggested the sponsorship ultimately became a firm partner.

Substantive results such as these can be duplicated with proper planning. According to the partner who was instrumental in the firm's success, some important considerations include buy-in from the top—essentially, key partners demonstrating a genuine commitment to the firm's participation in the minority bar association event—in addition to vigorous, aggressive follow-up with event attendees. In order to build on the momentum of the event, that firm's strategic plan included mechanisms to keep the attendees apprised of the firm's capabilities and the available talent pool on a post-event basis. In addition, the firm had selected a legal topic not only of major importance to most publicly traded companies, but also one where it could offer a diverse and impressive pool of

legal experts. At the end of the day, participants have to be left with an indelible sense that the firm is first-class, with top-flight legal professionals.

Karol Korbin Walker, the first African-American female partner at a major New Jersey law firm, the current president and first African-American president of the New Jersey State Bar Association and a past president of the Black Bar Association of New Jersey, agrees that law firm sponsorships of minority bar association functions can create tremendous long-term advantages.

First, with respect to diversity recruitment, Ms. Walker emphasizes that these events typically provide law firms with access to a wonderful pool of diverse talent.

Reflecting upon America's changing demographics and the overall "browning" of our population, which has sparked an increased interest in seeking diverse counsel, Ms. Walker notes that companies are at risk if their outside legal counsel consist of homogeneous attorneys who, as a group, may lack the needed perspectives to address the myriad legal issues that are bound to reflect different viewpoints of the American (and international) spectrum. Increasingly, companies associate limited viewpoints with increased risk and liability.

Since minority bar associations offer numerous programs, including some that address substantive legal issues, Ms. Walker points out that it is not unusual for companies to participate primarily for the purpose of seeking to identify and retain diverse outside legal counsel. While yet to become epidemic, more and more, corporate legal departments are requesting, and in some cases monitoring, their law

firms for diversity numbers as they relate to gender and race. Ms. Walker further notes that one financial behemoth will soon implement a mandate—with a rather aggressive deadline—for its several hundred law firms to have their diversity numbers substantially reflect the company's own diversity percentages.

For law firms seeking to meet the diversity expectations of their current clients and for others looking to expand business opportunities, these minority bar association events clearly offer a terrific platform for the firms to demonstrate their expertise and make companies aware of their overall pool of available legal talent across racial, ethnic and gender lines.

So, at the very least, even if you may be somewhat reluctant about committing to a full-fledged sponsorship, it would be well worth the time and manpower to have a diverse pool of your promising attorneys and key partners attend these functions just to get a sense of who the players are and how other law firms are utilizing this resource. You might use this information to build a model for future business development activities, or you might consider some ways to distinguish your firm. In any case, whatever course of action the firm ultimately takes, it should be based upon first-hand knowledge versus speculative scenarios of what could have been. •

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