

Firms Get Creative To Grow Female Partner Ranks

By Julie Zeveloff

Law360, New York (August 02, 2010) -- Women still lag behind men in securing partner status at major law firms, and many experts say the failure of some female attorneys to build strong books of business factors into the discrepancy. Law360 invited firms to tell us what steps they are taking to narrow the gender gap in their partner ranks. Here is a snapshot of their initiatives.

Firms doing the most to improve the chances of women earning partnerships are doing away with the “old boys’ club” mentality that typically favors male associates for the partnership track, Law360 found. They are also gearing business development programming and networking opportunities directly to their female associates.

“Most people would agree that the key to the highest level of success in law firms is in client relationships,” said Nicole Aurebach, founder of the Coalition of Women’s Initiatives in Law Firms, a Chicago-based nonprofit with around 35 member firms.

“But traditionally, women have fewer training opportunities than men in terms of informal business development, because so much happens by happenstance,” she added, citing the golf outings and closed-door meetings that often seem the exclusive domains of men.

The numbers underlie the imbalance; while women make up nearly half of law school students, the number of female partners at major law firms still hovers around 20 percent.

Kit Chaskin, who heads Reed Smith LLP’s women’s initiative network, said her firm hones the business development skills of female associates in their fourth year, when they start specializing and contemplating partnership.

The Reed Smith program, which is available to all the firm’s fourth- through eighth-year associates, pairs participants and mentors, allowing for “intensive communication” about the path to partnership, Chaskin said.

Participants develop a business plan and set short- and long-term career goals; they also participate in roundtables with partners to discuss the challenges and resources necessary to become a partner.

Some firms are taking an even broader tack, rolling business development into career management skill-building programs in order to teach women concrete strategies — how to effectively hand out a business card, how to handle a tough conversation — that are not part of the law school curriculum.

Vinson & Elkins LLP is one of several firms to partner with Carol Frohlinger of the consulting firm Negotiating Women Inc. in a new program that trains female partners to run a series of leadership workshops for midlevel and senior associates.

“The challenges women face are different than those their male colleagues encounter,” Frohlinger said. “The importance of supporting women as they manage their careers proactively is obviously a benefit to the firm as well as to the individual woman.”

Rather than focus on practice skills, like many law firm training programs, the initiative, called Just Add Women, has helped the firm ramp up on its leadership training, said Karen L. Hirschman, who chairs the Vinson & Elkins' women's initiative.

“The program offers leadership training to facilitators who are young women partners and who have not had leadership roles in the firm before,” Hirschman said. “I think firms are now realizing how important it is to provide leadership training, and I do think women can benefit from it more if they focus on it earlier in their careers.”

Foley & Lardner LLP is also involved in the Just Add Women pilot program, which offers meeting agendas on everything from building a strategic network to positioning oneself for the “right” assignments.

“These are not necessarily skills that are taught in law school, but they are skills that are key to the practice of law,” said Mary Kay Martire, who head's Foley & Lardner's women's group.

Dozens of law firms, including Orrick Herrington & Sutcliffe LLP, Baker & McKenzie LLP and Proskauer Rose LLP, have also sent delegates to the Women Rainmakers Roundtable, an initiative run by Sara Holtz of ClientFocus.

The two-year program helps participants grow their books of business by teaching marketing skills, expanding referral networks and helping them to build their overall confidence.

Orrick also brought Holtz in-house to meet with all the firm's female partners.

“Sara's very practical — very high-energy and a lot of fun,” said Kathy Crost, who heads the firm's women's initiative. “She helps people to focus on the more effective and efficient ways to spend their time in business development.”

Once Holtz has completed the year-long roundtable at Orrick, the firm plans to recap the program for its senior associates and of counsel, Crost said.

Of course, teaching business development skills is only part of the picture. Firms are also offering an ever-expanding array of networking events for women attorneys to put those skills to use in settings where they feel comfortable engaging prospective clients.

For example, Weil Gotshal and Manges LLP's women's affinity group recently hosted a session focused on networking skills and how to leverage woman-to-woman client relationships.

The group then co-sponsored a three-way networking event with KPMG and Bank of America, two of the firm's major clients, so participants could practice what they learned, said Meredith Moore, director of global diversity for Weil.

Schiff Hardin LLP's women's networking group publishes a quarterly newsletter for around 2,000 firm clients, spotlighting what female attorneys are doing at the firm.

Felice Rose, who chairs Schiff's gender subcommittee, called the newsletter a great business development tool, especially since it allows the firm to highlight the diversity and talent of its female attorneys to clients and prospective clients in a nonintrusive way.

"With the newsletter, the editorial board and other women at the firm are always suggesting ideas about their colleagues, so [women] are not necessarily put in a position where they have to toot their own horn. It's truly a collaborative effort," Rose said.

Schiff also recently hosted a family networking event for over 200 attorneys, clients and referrals at a local park. Last year's inaugural event was so successful, despite a downpour, that this year, attendance jumped more than a quarter, Rose said.

"Everyone networked with their families in tow, so they didn't have to choose between work and home," Rose said. "It lets you get out there and connect at a different level."

Other firms are also getting creative in terms of female-friendly networking events: Brown Rudnick LLP hosts wine tastings, Paul Hastings LLP's San Francisco office hosts a speaker series on women's workplace issues and Andrews Kurth LLP hosts an annual three-day retreat for women attorneys and clients featuring speakers and outdoor activities.

An ever-growing number of firms, including Goodwin Procter LLP and McCarter & English LLP, are also participating in 85 Broads, a global organization of female professionals that offers social events in addition to a massive online network.

The women-only events and online networks are effective since they give female lawyers a more comfortable platform from which to promote themselves to prospective clients, attorneys agreed.

Allotting a budget to women's business development can really pay off: 64 percent of the 50 major firms named in the 2009 Working Mother/Flex-Time Lawyers LLC survey of best law firms for women said they set aside resources for that purpose, said Deborah Epstein Henry, founder and president of Flex-Time Lawyers.

And 90 percent of the firms on that list said they sponsored networking events for women lawyers and the firm's women clients.

But Henry cautioned that firms needed to do more than just pay lip service by budgeting for women's development and organizing networking sessions. She advised them to track their female promotion rates over a series of years and take into account how the firm awards credit to ensure the initiatives remain effective.

CORRECTION: An earlier version of this story misidentified Reed Smith's Kit Chaskin. She is the head of the firmwide women's initiative network. The error has been corrected.