Are Women's Business Development Initiatives Still Needed?

Erika Steinberg

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Summary

- Women may no longer need a gender-specific approach to business development as they become better represented in the legal field.
- Focusing business development efforts on clients' individual interests leads to more meaningful connections.
- Women's business development initiatives are still helpful in providing opportunities to form relationships.

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Twenty years ago, law and business were still so male-dominated that women were often advised to focus on business development activities popular with men, like golf or poker. But now, in the United States, women make up 28% of law firm partners, just over 50% of law firm associates, and 39% of lawyers overall. As women's presence in law has grown, is there still a place in the legal world for "business development for women"? Or has the concept become obsolete?

It's About Forming Great Relationships

Some business development coaches believe that, in today's environment, women don't need a gender-specific approach. They simply need to approach business development thoughtfully and consistently.

"Women lawyers today are simply too busy to pick up a skill they aren't interested in," explains Randi Rosenblatt, who provides business development consulting, training, and coaching to lawyers and law firms as the founder and CEO of Upward Stride. Instead, she believes that women prefer to engage in business development activities they enjoy and that actually work for them — and focusing on clients' individual interests is always a win.

"I advise attorneys to get to know their clients," she says, "and suggest they focus their business development efforts on what they learn about their clients as individuals, because it will help create more meaningful connections." This can include considering what an opposite-gender client would enjoy. "I do see attorneys being thoughtful in how to engage contacts of the opposite gender. A male attorney may invite a female client to lunch or a performance. A female attorney may invite a male client to a baseball game or bourbon tasting event," she says. But ultimately, the ideal is to create engaging business development opportunities where everyone participates.

Cari Grieb, a partner in the Chicago office of Chapman and Cutler, echoes this idea. She invites all of her associates to client-related events such as closing dinners and sporting events. "The important thing is that the activity provides everyone with an opportunity to talk and to get to know each other. My goal is to facilitate connection so that everyone on the team has an opportunity to form great relationships."

Business development coach and host of the "Be That Lawyer" podcast Steve Fretzin believes that the fundamentals of business development are similar for men and women. "Business development activities, including client outreach for quality introductions or development of strategic partners, work equally and sometimes even better for women in law. It's all about motivation and having plans and processes that make business development predictable."

Women's Support and Mentorship Remains Important

Randi Mason, a partner and co-chair of the corporate practice at Morrison Cohen in New York City, says that while the male mentors she had early in her career provided invaluable support and advice, the women's initiative at her firm is both valuable and necessary. "Women's groups provide a place for women to ask questions that are specific to women. For example, in general, women have been socialized to be less up front around business development, and the women's initiative program provides an opportunity to mentor women lawyers in that area." She also appreciates the atmosphere at women's conferences, which she describes as "warmer and more welcoming" compared to enormous industry conferences where the vibe can be "unapproachable."

One of the earlier women-focused business development programs was PokerDivas, which was created by Ellen Leikind in 2006 to help women who felt shut out of male-dominated business development events learn leadership and negotiation skills by playing poker. She states, "I've noticed that at women-only events, camaraderie and connection often take the lead, with business opportunities naturally following. In mixed-gender events, the focus tends to shift more toward securing deals and prospects up front. Both approaches are valuable and bring different dynamics to the table." Still, women's preferences are personal, and some do gravitate more to mixed-gender events. Ultimately, she says, "women attend events where they feel welcome and where they can cultivate good prospects."

When Leikind started PokerDivas, events and initiatives focused on women were rare. But now that's not always the case, according to Casie Davidson, a partner at Simon, Peragine, Smith & Redfearn in New Orleans. In recent years, she says, women's initiatives have been more available and accessible than when she first started practicing. "Firms are still creating opportunities for women attorneys to engage in business development, and the lawyers themselves are creating these opportunities too."

Bonnie Lee Polk, a partner at Williams Parker in Sarasota, agrees that business development opportunities for female attorneys exist in both the legal and business worlds now, so she doesn't have to go out of her way to look for them. But while Polk admits that specific programs may no longer be needed, she still considers them very helpful. "Women have a different camaraderie, different needs, and a different approach than men." And as a litigator, Polk says that, in spite of the greater number of women practicing law, she still sometimes finds herself the only woman in the room during multiparty litigation.

Beyond Social Activities

It is not just about networking and social activities. Grieb has noticed that business development presentations for clients and prospects seem to be led by women attorneys far more often than when she was an associate. “I make a point of including my associates and partner colleagues, regardless of gender, in those meetings.” The benefit to her colleagues is clear, she notes. “Being in the room helps them form their own relationships with their counterparts at the client, which is an essential part of successful business development.”

Davidson’s experience at her firm has been similar. “Our current managing partner at Simon, Peragine is a woman, and the prior managing partner was a woman. The women attorneys at our firm are well-represented in our work with our clients.”

A New Perspective

Programs oriented toward women can offer men a new perspective as well. Leikind says that even though they are still female-centric, her PokerDivas events are no longer exclusive to women. “Recently, we hosted a business development program for a law firm in New York. There were two men who attended out of about 50 people. I had a call with one of them about having an event for his company, and he thanked me. He said that he experienced for the first time how women must feel when they are only one of a few in the room.”

It seems that women’s initiatives are not as essential as they were when women were not as well-represented in the legal world, and that the skills of business development are not necessarily gender-specific. Women-specific opportunities can be helpful, and many women appreciate the chance to connect with other women in ways that are less common in mixed-gender situations. There is, after all, a power in affinity networks to make a big world feel a little smaller.

Author

Erika Steinberg

Erika Steinberg, founder of CMO2Go, has been working with law firms to maximize their marketing for more than 30 years. CMO2Go provides senior level fractional marketing support to midsize law firms around the United...

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