

Why Attorneys Need to Get Out of the Office and Get Involved in the Legal Community

By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office Managing Director

For many attorneys, especially those in large law firms, life as an attorney can seem pretty solitary. There are, of course, the subtle and entertaining email exchanges with your peers, as well as meetings with other attorneys and clients. There is the occasional CLE event, firm retreat, or maybe even a firm social event here and there. Nevertheless, many attorneys rarely venture too far out of the office and into the legal community. Time away from work is family or recreation time-something to be cherished and certainly not time you would want to spend with other lawyers.

I have been studying successful lawyers for more years than I care to count. The most successful attorneys are also generally the most visible. This is not always the case, but it usually is. Moreover, when an attorney is attempting a lateral move, being involved in the legal community is something that can help him/her a great deal. In numerous placements I have made-and in the majority of the largest and most significant ones-it was the attorney's involvement in the legal community that was what got him/her the job.

This article discusses the importance of getting out in the legal community to your legal career and, ultimately, to getting a job. While there are several benefits to being visible, the most important of these are: (1) If you are visible, you will be in people's spotlights; (2) if you are visible, you will learn more; and (3) if you are visible, you will have a better chance of getting a job and being employable.

1. If You Are Visible, You Will Be in People's Spotlights

It would be difficult to think of any politician, even the proverbial class president, [who was able to rise to the top without networking with a lot of people and being involved in the community](#). The class presidents you have known probably attended all the football games and cheered, even if they hated football. The traditional politician goes out and gives speeches. The traditional politician may even write books and articles. Most of these articles and books are all the same, something about the need for change. None of this is an accident. In order to capture the public's attention, politicians, like successful lawyers, must get into the spotlight.

If you were unjustly accused of a crime and needed a criminal attorney-a really good criminal attorney-my sense is that one of a few names would come to mind. I am assuming Barry Scheck, F. Lee Bailey, Johnnie Cochran, and others might be among these names. Regardless of whether or not these are good attorneys, their unique knack for self-promotion and the ability to harness the power of the press have put these names at the tip of your tongue and in your personal spotlight.

The fact is that there are names like these in every major legal market in the United States. [This is true whether or not you are talking about mezzanine financing, workers' compensation, litigation, personal injury, or corporate bond issues](#). In all cases, the attorneys who get ahead-in a major way-manage to put themselves in the legal spotlight. If they did not have this talent, they would not be as successful as they are.

I am assuming a lot of this conversation sounds quite familiar. Yes, this is the same rationale for branding that corporations follow all day long. Branding makes sense. If you have ever wondered why a brand might pay \$50,000 to have a two-page ad inside a magazine with a couple of attractive models and nothing more, the answer, of course, is branding. Here, as with all branding exercises, the company will be attempting to get your attention so you associate its brand with *something*.

The main reason to be visible in the legal community is so that you can be in the spotlight of others both inside and outside the legal community. If you are visible, people will see you. If they see you, they will associate you with whatever you are doing to be visible. If you are making a speech about an area of law, they will associate you with this area of law. Even if you are not regularly speaking, but just attending events about a given topic regularly, they will associate you with this area of law, as well. In order to [succeed at the practice of law](#), people need to know who you are.

Rising above the hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of similar attorneys in your legal market is no easy task. Most of the activities that attorneys are involved in are quite solitary and involve their firms, their firms' clients, and perhaps judges if you are a [litigator](#) (who goes to court). All of these people may know who you are, but there are literally thousands of other people who need to know who you are.

When you read your local legal newspaper, there are undoubtedly numerous articles referencing attorneys in your community. Judges, lawyers, politicians, and others also need to catch the attention of outside people in order to get where they are. Moreover, major rainmakers must also do the same. By being visible in the legal community, you open yourself up to a whole host of potentialities that would not exist without your being visible. In order to be visible, you must take action.

There are several ways attorneys take action to become visible in the legal community. If you write an article about a legal topic and it is seen by numerous people, this will likely generate referrals for you because people will think you are an expert on the given topic. The same goes for speeches and attending events of legal significance. The more visible you are, the more likely it is that reporters in the legal community will know who you are as well. You need to publicize yourself. If you are unknown in the legal community, you will certainly not be able to benefit from everything the world can offer you when you are known.

If you are practicing in a law firm, the chances are that you regularly hear that such-and-such attorney from your law firm has gone and made a speech about some patently obvious topic from time to time. Some examples immediately come to mind that I have heard in the past:

"Real Estate: Will the Market Improve?"

"Discovery In Litigation: Tactics for Improvement"

"Expert Witnesses: Techniques for Preparing Them for Maximum Effectiveness"

"Employment Law: How to Protect Against FMLA Violations"

All of these are noble topics. Most of these topics, however, are pretty obvious to most experienced practitioners. Nevertheless, law firms will trumpet out their clients, prospective clients, and others to these presentations. This is not to say that these are not noble topics and the attorneys who attend them will not learn anything-they will-but the substantive content of most of these events is pretty weak. Given this fact, there must be another purpose to these sorts of events. There is.

Following (or prior to) one of these events, a well-managed law firm will generally issue a press release and email the attorneys in the firm about the speech or event. The point of all this activity is to generate a buzz that the law firm and the attorney(s) making the given presentation are experts in one area of the law or another. This will be reinforced in the attorneys inside the presenter's firm, as well as the attorneys who ultimately hear the presentation.

The value of this is that an individual or the firm is being put in the spotlight. A strong percentage of rainmakers in law firms manage to consistently get into the spotlight using various methods. They often do so by making speeches or writing articles about the banal and obvious. Regardless of how this is done, it is crucial for an attorney to be in the spotlight in order to advance.

2. If You Are Visible, You Will Learn More

If you are visible, you will be in a position to learn. The image at the beginning of this article-of the solitary attorney working alone inside an office-is all too common. By getting out in the legal community, you will be exposed to others, knowledge about what others are doing, the status of different ideas, who is who, and more. By learning all of this information, you will put yourself in a position to even further distinguish yourself because you can recalibrate and adjust to this information to become more effective.

Insulated inside a law firm, you are learning from the attorneys you are working with and the clients you are working with. Certainly, you may read legal periodicals, but there is really no substitute for direct knowledge from others. All of this is more concrete and far more likely to be advantageous to you. In addition, you are likely to get more nuances of various information, as well as off-the-record information about the legal community. The advantages of learning more through networking cannot be understated.

While learning through networking is somewhat of a personal calculus vis--vis what it is to you, I believe that one of the more important aspects of this is that it gives you a better appreciation of what you are doing. For example, if you know the network of attorneys in your practice area in your city, you have a better sense of what you need to do to compete to get clients. If you know more about your practice area, you can improve your work. If you bring all of this together, you can have a better appreciation for the practice of law and become a more complete attorney.

The fact is that you need to get involved with the legal community and other attorneys in order to make this happen. You will learn more if you are involved in the legal community, and this will help your career.

3. If You Are Visible, You Will Have a Better Chance of Getting a Job

I want to be clear about one thing: It is not easy to get a job as an attorney. If you have been practicing for more than 5 or 6 years, it is even more difficult to get a job. If you have been practicing more than 10 years and do not have any major business, it can be extremely difficult to get a job. While my recruiting efforts are focused on law firms, my rationale applies equally to other types of legal employers you may be interested in. Moreover, the more prestigious the employer, the more difficulties you will have getting a job with it. Some law firms are so exclusive that they have virtually never hired laterally throughout their entire histories.

One of the hallmarks of a law firm is that it is somewhat like a 15th-century guild. Law firms, in particular, are extremely suspicious of outsiders and attorneys that are not part of their firms. When I am placing attorneys laterally, for example, it is quite rare for an attorney to move from a less prestigious to a more prestigious firm. This does happen-and given the vagaries of practice area demands, the state of the market, and other factors-it might even happen a lot during certain times. Nevertheless, as a general rule, it does not happen that often.

When a group of lawyers is deciding whether or not to hire you, or even bring you in for interviews, it is going to be suspicious as a general rule. Guilds being what they are, attorneys are going to be suspicious of anyone who is switching jobs. They will be even more suspicious if they do not know you, or know of you. If they know you and do not like you, then you are toast, of course. If they know you (or of you) and have a generally good impression of you, they are going to be much more likely to want to speak with you. Some sort of prior group acceptance really goes a long way. Here are some short examples of conversations I have had with hiring partners over the years:

"The people who interviewed him were all unsure, but Nancy from accounting noticed him in the hall and said that she remembered him from a public speaking course and thinks he is a good guy." (third-year lawyer)

"We really could get by without someone like him at his level, but one of our clients has spent some time with him at a couple of law school alumni events, and everyone really liked him." (fourth-year partner with no

business)

"Although he is a litigation candidate, Jim from our tax department said that people in the local bar association like him a great deal." (fourth-year lawyer)

I could go on and on with similar stories. Nevertheless, the point is that when you connect with people outside of your own sphere of influence, this will help you. The familiar is always more comfortable than the unfamiliar. If you become familiar to others in the legal community, you will have a better chance of getting a job if you ever need one.

While I have not even touched upon this, and you would think I would, another real benefit of all this involvement in the legal community is that it can lead to a job. When you walk around most law firms, I would estimate that as many as 20% of the attorneys at many law firms are there because they knew someone. They knew someone from some sort of involvement in the legal community.

How do you think hiring decisions are made in most law firms and other legal organizations? One of the first things that happens is the law firm has to identify a need. If the law firm identifies a need, the chances are very good that it made this determination because a partner somewhere in the firm-or a client-was throwing off work that could not be adequately serviced with the existing personnel inside the law firm. Once this need is met, before an ad goes up in the paper, a job board, or on the firm website, the partner will generally ask themselves, "Do I know anyone?" This will occur even prior to a recruiter's (such as myself) getting involved in the search.

What happens a large percentage of the time (especially at smaller and mid-sized firms) is that *the partner does know someone*. The person he/she knows may not necessarily be the most qualified for the position and may not even represent the massive universe of possible candidates for the position. What the partner will know is that (1) he/she knows the person and (2) based on his/her previous contact with the person, he/she feels comfortable with the person. This is an instant seal of approval. A call may go out; an informal chat may occur. Whatever happens, a potential hire may occur because someone was in the spotlight and on the partner's radar. That is, someone was on the partner's radar who does not even work at the firm.

Conclusions

As a recruiter, I can tell you that the most sought after attorneys are the most visible. Becoming visible can get you clients. Becoming visible can help you learn more and become a better attorney. Becoming visible can also make you much more employable than you would be if you choose not to be visible.

See [The Four Types of Attorneys: The Finder, Minder, Binder and Grinder](#) for more information.

In terms of employability, visibility is important because it gives others a comfort level with you as a brand. No matter how large or small the legal market you are practicing in, you are a brand. In almost all cases, employers, like consumers, choose the more-familiar over the less-familiar brand. Become a familiar brand.