

American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division
The Affiliate

Failure Is the Key to Success

By Jill M. Kastner

When anyone asks me about the programs I've put together, I love to discuss my leadership conference, which won an ABA YLD award, or Wisconsin's Law Day, which serves more than 1,000 students each year. I rarely mention the CLE at which only eleven people showed up or the food drive that flopped. Yet, I've learned far more from my mistakes than from my successes.

Sometimes, programs flop for reasons beyond your control (e.g., a snow storm in November). But most of the time, you can learn a lot from the things that go wrong.

Manage Expectations

It was a great social networking event with a good turnout. Members gave positive feedback to the Hennepin County Bar Association New Lawyers Section (HCBA NLS).

"Hands down, it was a fantastic event," said Sitso Bediako, HCBA NLS's ABA/MSBA Liaison. There was just one problem—one of the event's sponsors was not happy. That sponsor had a different understanding of how it would be recognized for its sponsorship and how it would be able to interact with the young lawyer participants.

"We learned the importance of understanding the expectations of the sponsors . . . and managing those expectations," said Sitso. Next time, Sitso said his group would make sure they did "more to acknowledge the sponsor during the event."

Never Assume One Success Will Lead to Another

The Chicago Bar Association Young Lawyers Section (CBA YLS) ran a program called "Meet the Firms." In its first year, the event was a big success with many firms and young lawyers attending. The YLS decided to run the project annually. After a few years, however, the program was poorly attended.

"By the third or fourth run of the program, we realized that many of the attendees were disappointed in the lack of job prospects available during the event," said Natacha von Will, Vice-Chair of CBAYLS. "The initial reason for doing the event was to familiarize people with various law firms in Chicago. Although we never marketed the event as a job fair, it seems that many attendees had the expectation of obtaining job leads."

According to Natacha: "It also sent mixed messages . . . because as the economy soured, there were some layoffs and the event created the perception that the firms were hiring." The down economy also caused fewer firms to participate.

The lesson learned for the YLS is that while a project may at first be successful, this does not guarantee continued success, particularly in different economic cycles. "We must constantly communicate with both the participating firms and attendees what they hope to get out of the program," said Natacha.

In light of what the YLS learned, it discontinued the program and replaced it with a program called "What to Do with Your J.D." to help those seeking employment look outside the traditional lawyer box.

Enthusiasm Is No Substitute for Planning

When the ABA YLD first rolled out its "Wills for Heroes" program, many young lawyer groups were excited to bring it to their areas. More than one eager group tried to quickly put together a clinic. This never ended well and often resulted in the group having to go back to the drawing board.

For those doing Wills for Heroes, you know it can't be thrown together without significant planning and resources. You need pre-prepared estate planning documents tailored to comply with your state's laws; you need computers, printers, and trained volunteers—just to name a few things. This requires weeks, if not months, of planning.

So if your group wants to do Wills for Heroes, *Serving Our Seniors*, or another big project, don't make the mistake of jumping into things before the planning is done.

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Avoid Bad Turn Out

I thought I had a great program: three hours of free CLE presented by respected local lawyers. I set it for a Friday afternoon when no other major program was taking place. An area firm donated a large conference room and free parking. We promoted the event via e-mail, Facebook, and at our social events. The year before, a free program at about the same time of year filled the room.

So, why did only eleven lawyers show up?

After some analysis, I figured out the problem—the topic. My successful CLE the year before was “Kids Advocacy,” focused on guardian ad litem (GAL) training. I tried to continue that theme by giving a free CLE on student disciplinary proceedings and student access to education. Although this is an important issue in my community and a growing area of practice, most young lawyers did not find it relevant to their work or to their interests in pro bono. Although young lawyers already knew about the relevance of GAL training, I failed to educate them about the relevance of this newer area of law.

The lesson I learned was that free CLE was not enough to entice young lawyers to learn about a topic. I needed to either select a known relevant topic or educate members about the relevance of a topic to them.

Learn from Your Mistakes

That CLE was far from my only failure. For example, I've learned that when scheduling an event, always check for conflicts AND don't be afraid to reschedule if another big event later takes your date. Where I'm from, that means never schedule anything during a Packer game (who'd have thought a playoff game would later be set for that day!).

I hope this article helps you avoid the mistakes discussed and teaches you the importance of analyzing the good, bad, and mediocre of each program your group does. Never overlook the glitches and problems. Instead, examine them carefully and, without laying blame, learn how you can avoid repeating that mistake in the future.

Jill M. Kastner is ABA YLD Communications Director and an Attorney at Legal Action of Wisconsin's Road to Opportunity Program, removing legal barriers to employment.