

## Mandatory Bars and the Economy

*By Francine Bailey*

Every affiliate—both in and out of the country—has undoubtedly felt the effects of the economic woes of the past year. But how is the pain of the economic climate affecting mandatory bars, particular?

### Keep Members Active Despite the Economy

Although mandatory bar associations do not face the challenge of membership recruitment, these affiliates are not without membership issues. Affiliates must find creative and effective ways to engage members. These affiliate leaders cannot assume that members will become or stayed involved.

When times are tough, it's more important than ever for bars to provide value to their members. *The Affiliate* asked leaders for some of their best practices to successfully motivate members from inactive to active. Below are some of the suggestions that we received:

- identify issues of importance to members and address those issues;
- use several mediums to communicate with members (e-mail, website, Facebook, print);
- create committees on relevant issues and actively recruit new members for leadership positions (for example, CLE, networking, and/or pro bono committees);
- for state bars, reach out and go to where the members are located—look outside major population centers to reach members and find volunteers;
- create inclusive programming;
- be vocal and promote the good work you do, not only to your members but also to the big bar, employers, and the media;
- form partnerships with county, local, minority, and specialty bar associations to increase exposure and provide relevant benefits to members;
- highlight your young lawyer leaders and volunteers (and their firms) who do a good job in your newsletters and press releases, on your websites, and when reporting to your big bar, so others can see the value of being active members; and
- ask for help when needed—either from the big bar or from the ABA YLD.

The ABA YLD Affiliate Assistance Team (AAT) is a resource for any affiliate looking for help in designing bar programs, strategic planning, dealing with the big bar, fundraising, re-organizing, and/or developing new bar leaders. Because of its broad range of services and its familiarity with affiliates across the country, the AAT has an arsenal of informational resources and advice to provide affiliates on request.

### Stay Relevant

*The Affiliate* asked AAT leaders Jason Hirshon and Jaime Hawk about the economic downturn and how it has affected mandatory bars around the country. They agreed that one problem is that many young lawyer groups have difficulty being seen as relevant by their big bars, legal employers, and even by young lawyers.

The relevance of a bar association is “directly related to the benefits provided,” said current President of the State Bar of Wisconsin’s Young Lawyers Division, Nick Vivian. He added that for young lawyers in small firms and geographically isolated areas, the mandatory bar association increases exposure to benefits that they may not otherwise have the ability to take advantage of.

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Jason and Jaime of the AAT agreed. “[B]ecause the majority of mandatory bar [associations] are statewide, young lawyers in rural regions and areas that do not have active young lawyer bar associations can be attracted by the services provided by mandatory bar [associations].” Mandatory bar associations also have a slight advantage in these economic times because they are mandatory. As has been the case over the past six-to-nine months, many law firms, especially smaller firms, are cutting expenses including non-essential bar dues. Mandatory bar associations therefore offer an opportunity for young lawyers to become active, when other, discretionary, options are no longer available.

### **Engage Members**

That certainly does not mean that mandatory bars can sit on their laurels and expect young lawyers to take advantage of what mandatory bars offer. At times, YLDs find themselves under pressure to justify their existence to the “big bar” or prove that the young lawyer division is still relevant. Vivian noted that the economic environment has made scrutiny over funding even more stringent: “[YLD] programs must successfully meet the goals and objectives of the bar association or they will not be supported. Bar associations are becoming increasingly conservative in their funding efforts.”

Affiliates must find creative and effective ways to engage members. “Leaders of these affiliates cannot assume that members are engaged,” says Vivian. As part of a larger organization, leaders must engage members in order to keep up with the current issues that are important to the members.

Hawk and Hirshon also suggested recruiting young lawyers from all parts of the state to serve on committees and in leadership positions to achieve geographic diversity and to replicate successful programs around the state. In addition, affiliates can form partnerships with county, local, minority, and specialty bar associations to increase visibility of the state mandatory bar association young lawyers division.

Another way to gain insights and best practices on how other bar leaders are meeting today’s challenges is by attending national conferences hosted by the ABA YLD. These conferences provide the opportunity to network, learn about current hot topics among young lawyers, and learn about public and member service programs to take back home.

For more information about the AAT, affiliate leaders can contact any AAT member, or go to the ABA YLD website at [www.abanet.org/yld/affiliate.shtml](http://www.abanet.org/yld/affiliate.shtml).

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