

Happy Hour, Anyone? Social Networking Possibilities Await . . .

By James Bilsborrow

“Let’s get together for happy hour after work!” It’s a familiar refrain in law offices around the country. Although a happy hour is a great way to relax after a lengthy workday, young lawyer groups nationwide are increasingly using such events as valuable social networking tools.

The draw of happy hour events seems obvious: informal atmosphere, food, drinks, and lively conversation, often near the end of the work week. Many young lawyer groups host these events on a monthly basis, each time at a new local bar or restaurant.

Drop-in Socials

In Multnomah County, Oregon, the Young Lawyers Section hosts casual “drop-in socials,” which are intended to allow lawyers to reacquaint themselves with old friends and to introduce themselves to new ones.

The Young Lawyers’ Section of Delaware County, Pennsylvania, annually holds a special happy hour featuring local judges, which presents a unique occasion for young lawyers of all practice areas to socialize with members of the judiciary. In South Dakota, the statewide young lawyers section pairs with local law firms to sponsor monthly events across the state. Judges and senior members of the bar alike typically attend, allowing young lawyers the opportunity to mingle with more experienced members of the bar.

Maximizing the networking potential of a happy hour event often turns on attendance. The more attendees, the greater the networking possibilities.

“While the size of [our] events has varied, our main goal is always to increase attendance, as it is usually a way to get new lawyers involved with bar association activities,” says Maureen McGinnis, Chair-Elect of the Michigan Young Lawyers Section. Furthermore, while location, food, and drink are a constant attraction, young lawyer groups are using ever-more creative means to draw in their members. For example, the South Dakota Young Lawyers implemented a mentorship project that is tied to its monthly happy hour events. Mentor-mentee pairs attend the social event together, which is followed the next day by an organized meeting focusing on a specific topic of interest. South Dakota Young Lawyers Chair Sarah Theophilus says: “We find that there is a disconnect between older and younger lawyers in South Dakota,” and “the main focus with the social hour is to get our young lawyers meeting our more experienced attorneys.”

Fun and Unique Events

Of course, another sure-fire way to draw a crowd is to plan a particularly fun and unique event. The Michigan Young Lawyers recently devised and implemented an annual event entitled the “Michigan Young Lawyers Section Networking Stroll,” which Ms. McGinnis describes as the section’s “most innovative networking/social event.” Young lawyers meet at a local restaurant and, as the evening progresses, proceed to three additional venues within walking distance.

Each locale offers food and beverages and the event chair designs networking games intended to facilitate participants’ mixing. Game winners receive gift certificates that can be redeemed at each venue for various prizes. According to McGinnis, “The event continues to grow and bring new faces to our events, which is critical to perpetuating our local and state bar association leadership.”

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Add a Fundraiser

Although these regular happy hour events are an ideal opportunity to chat, relax, and swell the membership ranks, many young lawyers groups are also incorporating a public service component—often in the form of fundraising. In Multnomah County, the young lawyers division paired a recent social hour with a fundraiser for the Campaign for Equal Justice, an Oregon-based organization committed to ensuring equal access to justice for all Oregonians.

In Oakland County, Michigan, the Michigan Young Lawyers have joined happy hours with fundraisers to benefit local charities, such as Lighthouse of Oakland County, and national organizations, such as Habitat for Humanity and the Red Cross. The fundraising aspect serves to attract greater participation, which in turn enhances each event's networking potential.

Social Networking

The extent to which happy hour events facilitate social networking is important to young lawyers. Ms. Theophilus explained that the best-attended events are those in which young lawyers are offered the opportunity to mingle with more senior attorneys.

Ms. McGinnis, of Michigan, added that social and/or happy hour events "are important to new lawyers who are searching for jobs and contacts in the legal profession." In sum, a vibrant young lawyers division can greatly benefit from regular social events, including happy hours. The greater the attendance, the more successful the event from a social networking perspective.

So the next time you get an invitation from your local young lawyers division to stop in for happy hour, check it out before going home. It might be a boon to your career.

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