

## **Voluntary Bars—Building Membership and Getting Members Active**

*By Jill Kastner*

How do we build our membership? That's a question faced by most voluntary bar associations even in the best of times. Today, it's an even greater challenge. With many young lawyers without jobs and many firms and businesses cutting costs by no longer paying for voluntary bar dues, many young lawyers groups are struggling to retain members—and few are able to grow their numbers.

But don't despair. There are many tips your voluntary bar can follow to help increase your membership and to get current members more active in the group.

"To increase membership, the best thing to do is get people involved, such as through committees that are relevant and interesting to members," said Jaime Hawk, a member of the ABA YLD Affiliate Assistant Team.

If all of your bar's power is in the hand of a few board members, it's time to change that and create various committees to get other young lawyers involved and more vested in the organization. As they say, many hands make light work. Not only do committees help spread out the work, but they also generate great ideas and the ability to put on more programs and projects.

### **Serve Your Members**

This leads to an equally important bit of advice: *serve your members*. Your group needs to provide valuable benefits to your members. In typical years, this means quality networking, skills development, and opportunities for pro bono and/or public service. In this down economy, these services are more important than ever.

"Many young lawyers are out of work and/or have not found jobs yet," said Jason Hirshon, another member of the ABA YLD Affiliate Assistance Team. Thus, "affiliate events and participation in committees can be a unique way for young lawyers to network with other attorneys." For members forced to hang out their own shingles, it is more important than ever "to attend events and become more active to meet their peers, look for work, and gain referral sources."

"Also, CLEs on handling various issues in these tough economic times are also a way to get young lawyers in the door and encourage membership. In addition, it is important to encourage young lawyers to take advantage of pro bono opportunities to gain new skills and exposure to new areas of law, connect with other attorneys, and help to address the unmet legal needs in the community," said Jaime. "YLDs need to provide these opportunities."

### **Toot Your Own Horn**

Another bit of advice: *toot your own horn and that of active members*. Too often, young lawyers say they would like to be involved but their firm discourages it because it takes away from billable hours. The culprit is lack of understanding about what young lawyer groups are doing. As generation X and Y, we are great at doing the work, but not so great at advertising the good things we've done. As a bar leader, it is your job to not only provide benefits to your members, but also advertise those benefits to your members, potential members, and their employers.

- Give awards to your active members for the great work they've done.
- Issue press releases to the media and the big bar about your programs—and be sure to include the names of volunteers and active members (in smaller markets, the media often covers such events and projects).
- Use newsletters and/or your website to highlight projects, events, and leaders (if you don't have one, it's not too

## American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division *The Affiliate*

difficult or expensive to do an e-mail newsletter or put up a website).

- If you go to big bar meetings, be sure to spotlight members (and their employers) who have done a great job.
- Find other ways to educate and advertise the great work of your group and the exceptional work done by other leaders.

### **Offer Great Programs**

Jaime and Jason also recommend that young lawyer groups

- offer discount rates and hardship waivers for young attorneys who have not found a job and/or whose income is below a certain level,
- offer CLEs/skills development programs (especially at low or no cost),
- host mixers and functions for young lawyers to network,
- host mixers and functions that bring out judges or area business leaders for networking,
- provide accessible resources for young attorneys who have questions that need to be answered (such as a listserv or blog on your website),
- encourage pro bono activities, including pro bono that can help build skills for young attorneys, and
- offer mentoring programs.

### **But How?**

Now, this all sounds good, but how do you put on such great programming when funds are low and sponsors are rare? Jaime and Jason say: "This is another reason for affiliates to apply for ABA YLD subgrants." Information on these subgrants and the application process can be found in this issue of *The Affiliate*. Every issue of *The Affiliate* this year includes an article or two on ways bar groups can deal with the economy.

But there are other ways to get funding and/or reduce costs. For social networking events, think about getting a local reporting firm or document copy service to fund the mixer. For CLEs, seek free space from a firm or big bar group. Send out the materials via e-mail and avoid spending the cash on printing. These are just a few ideas that will save big money when putting on events to benefit your members.

The Affiliate Assistance Team is here to provide information, advice, and answer questions about putting on a program, advertising your work, and how to cut costs and/or raise funds in this difficult economy. Visit [www.abanet.org/yld/affiliate.shtml](http://www.abanet.org/yld/affiliate.shtml) for more information.

---

*Jill M. Kastner is the Editor of The Affiliate and an attorney at Legal Action of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.*

---