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"You've Come a Long Way, Ladies"

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I've been writing about women in the legal profession for seven years now, and sometimes, when I'm in the trenches, it seems like we haven't made much progress. There are few female managing partners of large firms. The number of women general counsel has remained pretty steady. And, in general, the highest levels of the profession aren't being taken over by people with purses.

So, it's easy to get discouraged. But then, every few years, my firm has its women-only retreat. And I get jazzed again.

Andrews Kurth began having periodic women-only retreats 15 to 20 years ago. At the time, it was still a fairly unusual thing to do, and nobody in the profession was convinced that giving women lawyers their own kind of marketing event was worth the investment. I mean, who *wouldn't* jump at the chance to spend four hours on the golf course?

But if we were testing the waters 15 to 20 years ago, we now have officially taken the plunge.

For our first event, we had difficulty even coming up with a guest list. Invitees included our female clients and senior female attorneys, and our total attendance, including Andrews Kurth lawyers, was fewer than 40. Our 1999 event only had 80 attendees, lawyers and clients.

At this year's event, held earlier this month in New Mexico, we had more than 100 executive women clients and 50 lawyers from our firm. Not only did we have no trouble filling our invite list, but the clients who attended this year's event reflected a well-known trend, i.e. they were higher on the corporate ladder than they were 15 years ago.

I say all this not to garner free advertising for my firm (although I am clearly grateful that it puts its money where its mouth is in terms of helping women develop their practices), but to report, happily, that women truly have come a long way, particularly in the past five to-10 years. Sometimes, it just requires a major benchmark event to convince me of that.

Many firms aren't sold on the notion of marketing by and to women. But it works, for the same reasons golf outings and sporting events work: Clients like to work with people they "click" with. And it's difficult to "click" with somebody you only know from a 30-minute drafting session or a brief meeting at a cocktail party.

Personal contact works, and the less business-like the environment, the better. If the thank you notes and new work we've received from clients who attended our retreat are any indication, the women who pay our firm to be their lawyers particularly like sending their work to lawyers who treat them as individuals, rather than paychecks.

Just Do It

Even if every firm in Texas decided to go whole hog into women-oriented marketing, however, women still have to overcome a few hurdles to become business development mavens.

- *We have to become as comfortable as men are discussing business outside the office:* Women seem to get the willies discussing business socially, and men don't seem to have that problem. I've seen dads at soccer games transition from critiquing the game to promoting their CPA skills with the greatest of ease. And, as a gender, they clearly benefit from this ability. The truth is, successful women continually mine their personal and professional contacts, and they are richly rewarded for it.
- *Ambition isn't a dirty word:* Women tend to attribute their success to "luck" and "serendipity," rather than to their own talent, hard work and determination. It's as if admitting we're ambitious makes us politicians or Madonna. But it's OK to be ambitious, to want to be known beyond the confines of your spouse and your children. And it's OK, once we've achieved some measure of success, to take credit for it. Just like men do.

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- *It behooves all women to help their female colleagues:* Much has been made of the so-called Queen Bee Syndrome, in which powerful women, seeking to consolidate their power, undercut the success of their female colleagues. I have no doubt that such a phenomenon exists, but I doubt it represents the majority of women in the workplace.

Clearly, women can and should do a better job of actively promoting the women they work with. The reason for this is that when a woman does poorly in a job, her failure is almost always attributed to her female-ness. The same is not true of men, however. Women in the workplace, therefore, should do everything in their power to ensure the success of their female co-workers, if only to pave the way for their own eventual accession to a seat of power. Hopefully, once they get there, they won't be the only member of their gender at that level, either.

Women have some re-wiring to do if we ever want to achieve parity with men in the workplace. But, if our firm's retreats are any indication, we have indeed made more progress than we give ourselves credit for.

And I, for one, won't chalk that up to serendipity.