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Robust Alumni Networks A Boon To Firms, Experts Say

By **Julie Zeveloff**

Law360, New York (May 20, 2010) -- As clients continue to demand greater efficiency from their attorneys, law firms are turning to an often overlooked population — their alumni — to handle work that can be outsourced at lower rates and generate new business, experts say.

“Established firms are thinking of how to outsource to alumni and alumni-run firms as a cost-control measure,” said Toni Whittier of Whittier Legal Consulting. “The referring firm gets to keep control of the matter and has confidence in the skills of its alumni.”

Ever since Dan Dain and two colleagues left Goodwin Procter LLP in 2006 to found the Boston-based boutique real estate development and litigation law firm now called Brennan Dain Le Ray Wiest Torpy & Garner PC, they have received a continuous flow of referrals from their former employer.

“We consider our practice to be complementary to Goodwin's,” Dain said. “Our practice is very much supported by referrals that come out of them due to conflicts and price issues.”

But the relationship works both ways, Dain said, adding that he also keeps an ear out for opportunities to send back to Goodwin Procter and has hired several former Goodwin Procter attorneys and staff members over the years.

The fact that the firms' relationship is built on a personal connection can be a major benefit to both parties.

“Because the only people who participate in an alumni network are former alumni, it's a vetted network and a tested network,” explained Anne Berkowitch, founder of SelectMinds, a social networking services provider for businesses.

While the legal industry has lagged behind other industries in terms of building out alumni networks, Berkowitch said, she has seen law firms make a much more concerted effort to connect with alumni in the past five years.

“Lawyers often leave firms to go in-house and can refer back business,” Berkowitch said. “For law firms and other businesses in the service industry, they have found that alumni represent a valuable population, primarily as a business development channel.”

Vickie Spang, chief marketing officer of Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton LLP, said her firm strives to maintain relationships with associates who left for in-house positions with clients or potential clients.

"Many associates will decide to go in-house after a few years," Spang said. "We generally have an excellent relationship with them, so they may reach back out to retain us."

"For in-house counsel, if they are coming in new to that role and need to retain outside counsel, they know their former firm very well and can cherry-pick exactly whom they would like to work with," she added.

Scott Westfahl, director of professional development at Goodwin Procter, said he first saw the benefits of an alumni network on business development while working at the management consulting firm McKinsey & Co.

"When I was at McKinsey, I didn't see them aggressively mining alumni for work — the work just came because people loved the firm," he explained. "That's what we find at Goodwin Procter — keeping in touch and keeping the network vibrant and alive only helps in that way."

Many major law firms maintain alumni websites, offering a range of firm news, educational resources and other services.

Spang said that for former Sheppard Mullin attorneys, the alumni directory was a huge draw.

"They want to stay connected to the firm and see what the firm is doing, but they are really interested in what individuals are doing," she said.

Also popular on the alumni sites are the job boards, often filled with opportunities passed along by clients or other alumni. While such listings may seem counterintuitive, they go a long way toward building a vibrant firm culture, Westfahl said.

"We know that not everybody is going to stay, whether it was their choice or our decision, and we want to find ways to create opportunities about which they would be excited," Westfahl said, adding that the firm had recently placed several former attorneys in jobs through its alumni network.

Such connections are particularly important in an era where law firm layoffs have virtually become daily news.

"Law firms have realized it behooves them to maintain relationships with alumni after they leave," Berkowitch said. Tides will eventually turn, she said, and firms may want to rehire those lawyers or turn them into clients.

Many law firms organize annual alumni gatherings, invite alumni to participate in professional development programs and send out periodic newsletters.

But industry insiders stressed that the personal relationships outweighed any networking activity or online platform.

"A lot of law firms have long realized that alumni are typically people who they've had wonderful relationships with," Spang said. "There are so many reasons people leave a firm, but there's no reason those friendships need to end."

She added, "if you treat people with respect for their entire tenure, you may get some unexpected dividends as a result."

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