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Perspectives on Law Firm Sustainability

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Perspectives on Law Firm Sustainability

Few law firms will pursue sustainability programs merely upon a basis of “doing good.” The reality is law firms are for-profit businesses that have stakeholders like all companies (owners, employees, and clients) to which they are accountable.

There must be a business reason for doing good or those projects are the first items to be eliminated during difficult times. Unless sustainability is a part of a law firm’s overall business and governance strategy, it will be relegated as a pet project that will not be taken seriously.

Part of any strategy of a law firm should be an extension of its brand — externally and internally. Externally, it is “what a law firm is known for” and internally it is “how employees or owners define their own self worth through the law firm to which they are affiliated.”

If a law firm can see sustainability as an extension of its brand, it will have a large impact upon its stakeholders. It will increase its bottom line and employee engagement, retention, and productivity while significantly reducing costs through waste and energy reduction and improving loyalty and productivity through stronger staff engagement. It’s no secret (or shame) that law firms want to achieve higher profits and employee engagement.

A law firm’s brand represents the promises the firm is making with key stakeholders, now and in the future. Its brand is the face of the firm. A law firm can be profitable and successful while also being a good corporate citizen. Said another way, a law firm’s sustainability policy can be a successful marriage of genuine business ratio-

nale with responsibility to people and natural resources.

Sustainability commitments are not transitory but are part of a strategy that should be included in a law firm’s business plan and budgeting process. Sustainability is not only an effort to “do good,” but is doing good as part of good business, which creates a cohesive workplace that employees value and enhances client and community awareness of a firm and its vision. Sustainability must become part of a law firm’s culture to be successful.

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The American Bar Association has provided sustainability tools that can be used in the practice of law. In addition, several state bar associations have provided environmental tools for firms to use.

The ABA House of Delegates in 2003 endorsed the internationally recognized understanding of sustainable development as “simultaneous achievement of environmental protection, economic development, social development, and peace, for present and future generations.” The delegates also committed to promote sustainable development and encouraged others to support it.

Two law practice tools were later developed. A law office can enroll in the ABA-EPA Law Office Climate Challenge by adopting specified best practices for paper management or by joining EPA’s Waste-Wise program, Green Power Partnership, or Energy Star program.

More than 250 law organizations, including at least eight law schools, are now enrolled in the Climate Challenge.

The ABA Section on Environment, Energy, and Resources Sustainability Framework for Law Organizations provides a different approach. (Bill Blackburn has led the SEER effort on this policy.) In adopting this policy, a law organization commits to sustainability’s triple bottom line of economic success, social responsibility, and environmental responsibility. The implementation guidelines state that the policy is to be applied flexibly, so that law organizations “prioritize and pace their efforts toward implementation over time.”

In contrast, some state bars have focused on the environmental aspect of sustainability. Partners in the Massachusetts Bar Association Lawyers Eco-Challenge agree to use their best efforts to implement green guidelines for law office management, green guidelines for land-

scape management, or both. More than 100 law offices have committed to meet these guidelines. The California and Pennsylvania bar associations have adopted similar programs.

Oregon Lawyers for a Sustainable Future has developed a model policy for law offices that focuses on waste reduction and recycling, energy use, travel, commuting, and carbon credits. OLSF has also published lists of specific practices for lunch vendors, outside meetings, tenant improvements, and building managers.

These approaches to law office sustainability are likely to grow and evolve in the years ahead.

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