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## Perception is reality when managers decide who makes partner

By Casey Sullivan

Daily Journal Staff Writer

From the first day newly hired lawyers set foot in their offices, managing partners keep a close eye on them to assess their potential.

And as firms cut back in the down economy, law firm management have become conservative when promoting lawyers to the ever-elusive position of partner.



Compounding the problem for young and upcoming associates, law firm managers are passing judgment on lawyers soon after they hire them rather than waiting until they're fully developed, according to Joshua Wayser, managing partner of the Los Angeles office of Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP.

It's hard to change how partners see you after that first impression, Wayser said, adding that he could often tell who will make partner and who won't within the first month of a young associate's arrival at the firm.

Ironically, most times the winning attributes have little to do with legal expertise.

"When you're a lawyer, what you're selling, at the end of the day, is trust," Wayser said, noting that he often sizes up lawyers in the office the same way a client would scrutinize a lawyer to determine whether they trusted them to handle their work. "And how you communicate with people reflects trust."

Law schools are trying to train young lawyers to communicate effectively with their superiors so that they aren't deemed untrustworthy before they're given a significant opportunity in a deposition or the courtroom.

They're implementing more hands-on and creative methods to educate students than in the past, focusing on matters like "law firm etiquette" to help graduates make the transition to practicing law and working with the partners who manage them.

At California Western School of Law, teachers have incorporated a professional conduct and responsibility course in its STEPPS program - a second-year crash course focused on exposing students to real-life scenarios of lawyering, including a section that addresses appropriate social behavior in the office.

UC Irvine School of Law offers an annual Decorum Protocol seminar, which prepares students to navigate the social circles of lawyers, judges and public officials.

"We're trying to be responsive," said Tim Casey, professor of the STEPPS program at California Western School of Law. He referred to a pressure that's been felt by law schools as firm managers look to them for more socially trained students. He said as part of the STEPPS program, students are given mock business cards and learn how to present themselves around the office and at client networking events.

Practicing attorneys, too, are taking initiative to help young lawyers succeed at the nonlegal aspects of their jobs. That includes teaching seminars to first-year associates on the do's and don'ts of the law firm office environment.

Many lawyers recognize that advancement in this profession hinges on the same social pieces that help lawyers generate business - personality, presentation and self-marketing.

Anne Andrews of Orange County-based Andrews & Thornton, a guest speaker for UC Irvine School of Law's Decorum Protocol seminar, said young lawyers often need to work on their handshakes, which mark the beginning of a relationship.

Andrews stressed that confidence is key in law firms and that she teaches young lawyers to use a two-pumps-and-release handshake that keeps the motion brief and strong.

"I think generationally, young people have a hard time shaking older people's hands," she said, noting many are intimidated by seasoned partners who have already climbed through the ranks. "You'll get the dead fish sometimes. That still happens from time to time."

Verbal communication can be another weakness.

Christiane Roussel, a senior associate at Hunton & Williams LLP, said a big problem young lawyers struggle with is how to communicate appropriately in the office and how to pitch themselves to partners in the same way they would with a client.

Roussel, who has chaired and moderated a program for summer and junior associates hoping to someday make partner, said strong communication comes in part by rarely admitting ignorance, but when it's necessary to do so, adding that you'll find the answer.

"It's catering to their needs, it's making their life easier, just like the partner does to his or her own client," Roussel said. Too often, associates perceive partners as colleagues, she said, a mistake that can result in sloppily written all-lowercase emails riddled with typos.

Wayser pointed to a recent incident when one of his associates sent him an email saying he didn't expect a favorable outcome on a case the firm had taken. The associate based that judgment on a past case about a related matter but didn't offer a follow-up plan explaining how the firm might resolve the problem. Wayser said he had to lecture the associate who sent the email.

"I always take a pause before I send an email to re-read it and say, 'Is this moving the ball forward?'" he said. "Is this addressing my needs? Am I delivering something that is effective and in a closed circle so there's no need for it to come back to me?' But they're not thinking that way."

Wayser, the Los Angeles managing partner at Katten Muchin, said as he considers associates when it comes time to promote, he looks for those who fit the brand of the firm and who he would consider a "go-to" person when if he were a client.

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