

# Market savvy: Women lawyers hone rainmaking skills

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JOURNAL STAFF

**Ilene Robinson Sunshine** is a top-notch attorney. But she's the first to admit that for some time, drumming up legal business didn't come naturally to her.

When she re-entered private practice after several years working for the court system, she quickly realized that survival in the brutal legal market of the 1990s required sharp business-development skills.

Sunshine, currently the co-chairwoman of **Sullivan & Worcester LLP's** labor and employment law group, found selling her services distasteful — that is, until she recast the process from a sales-based exercise to one in which she was building relationships.

Sensing that other women lawyers might need help in balancing the demands of family and a legal career — which, as law firms strive to be more business-savvy, increasingly includes attorneys taking a more proactive role in cultivating their books of business — Sunshine and others at her law firm formed **Sullivan & Worcester's** women's initiative. The initiative offers such things as firm-sponsored networking events for women and training for participants.

"Women (at the firm) felt they were



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**Legal Sales and Service Organization** director **Catherine Alman MacDonagh** and researcher **Harry Keshet** conducted an online poll indicating that women lawyers as a rule are hesitant to drum up business.

not developing the kind of business-development skills they felt their male counterparts had, whether intuitively or mentored or activities more accessible to them," Sunshine said.

A small but growing number of law firms and legal organizations have tak-

en steps in recent years to help women lawyers hone their sales and business-development skills.

**Leigh-Ann Patterson Durant**, health care litigator and HIPAA compliance lawyer for **Nixon Peabody LLP**, said women are often concerned about

abusing personal relationships. Like Sunshine, Durant taught herself to regard business development as offering to help someone rather than asking for business.

The Boston-based **Legal Sales and Service Organization Inc.** recently conducted an online poll indicating that simply learning to ask for business may be the greatest hurdle for women attorneys, even for those who say they are frequent networkers and public speakers.

"They don't want to cross barriers of intimate relationships of friends and ask for work," said study director **Harry Keshet**, a local organizational psychologist who has also done legal coaching through Boston-based **Law Practice Consultants LLC**. "It's a barrier that men do not have."

Another perceived barrier for women lawyers — particularly those raising families — may be the time investment, but firms tend to accommodate rainmakers, said litigator **Michelle Peirce** of Boston-based **Donoghue Barrett & Singal PC**, who is also on the board of the **Women's Bar Association of Massachusetts**.

"Even if you're not billing up a storm, other people are counting on your

# RAINMAKERS: Women lawyers hone their marketing skills

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work," Peirce said.

More than 400 women lawyers responded to the Legal Sales and Service Organization's study. Of the first 150 respondents, the self-identified rainmakers are far more likely to meet with or call referral sources to discuss business-development opportunities, inform referral sources of legal developments that may affect them, spend time cultivating relationships with referral sources and ask referral sources for introductions.

Although the percentage of women tapping into their referral sources is lower than might be expected, based on the early results of the organization's study, women lawyers in the real world are doing more marketing than they

were even five years ago, according to **Beth I.Z. Boland**, a partner in the securities litigation and corporate governance groups at **Bingham McCutchen LLP**.

Last year, Bingham joined the ranks of area law firms hosting networking events for the firm's female attorneys and clients.

Training and meetings among women partners to learn about one another's business and needs provide a foundation for external marketing, Boland said.

"We see the value of developing our own women partners and reaching out to the professional women's community," Boland said. "It's a very natural evolution," Boland said.

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