Time, Talent And Treasure: Maximizing The Impact Of Law Firm Philanthropy

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As law firms increasingly recognize the value to stakeholders, developing strategic ways to integrate their pro bono legal services with their charitable giving initiatives to maximize impact.

For the majority of law firms, formal charitable giving and corporate social responsibility programs have become a key business strategy for many corporations. Over time, these efforts — which may once have been considered an ideological practice — have become a key business strategy for many corporations.

Corporate America has long embraced the concept of CSR, investing in the community through grant making, sponsorships, matching donations, in-kind gifts and services, sustainability efforts, employee volunteerism and more. Over time, these efforts — which may once have been considered an ideological practice — have become a key business strategy for many corporations.

A recent report from Boston College’s Center for Corporate Citizenship shows that the majority of business executives believe corporate philanthropy contributes to company success and returns value to stakeholders. By investing in corporate philanthropy, businesses are engaging employees in ways that help with recruitment and retention, building deeper relationships with key stakeholders and clients, developing meaningful brand recognition and improving the communities in which they operate.

Law firms, on the other hand, have traditionally focused the majority of their philanthropy on the delivery of pro bono legal services. Based on data from the Pro Bono Institute, in 2013, the 140 law firms who have signed the Pro Bono Institute’s challenge performed more than 4.3 million hours of pro bono service — representing an average of 3.6 percent of those firms’ total paying client billable hours. The ABA Model Rules of Professional Conduct and the Colorado Rules of Professional Conduct both set an aspirational goal of 50 hours of pro bono service per attorney, per year. In addition to this professional obligation, over the past 15 years law firms have increasingly recognized the business case for pro bono in areas including recruitment, attorney retention and satisfaction, professional training and development, mentoring, marketing and client relations.

At Brownstein, we partner with nonprofits who can both benefit from the firm’s expertise and resources and that our attorneys feel passionate about. We often form partnerships with local nonprofits that qualify for pro bono legal services where ideally, we do the organization’s legal work pro bono, an attorney from the firm serves on the nonprofit’s board of directors, and the firm also provides resources to the nonprofit through volunteerism and financial contributions. For ethical reasons, the firm makes a clear distinction between pro bono service — in which our attorneys are providing legal services at no cost — and board service or employee volunteerism, encouraging both, but tracking and reporting each area separately. Our attorney board members do not provide legal advice to the organization’s attorneys at the firm.

In Denver, we are privileged to support outstanding Colorado nonprofit organizations including the Colorado Outward Bound School, Florence Crittenton Services, Food Bank of the Rockies, Freedom Service Dogs, Girls Inc. of Metro Denver, Habitat for Humanity, Hunger Free Colorado, Jewish Family Service of Colorado and Metro Caring.

By combining these resources — pro bono services, board service, employee volunteerism, financial contributions and more — law firms are better able to support the work of nonprofits in the community and engage their employees more deeply. The impact of combining a law firm’s time, talent and treasure to better the community should have a lasting impact on those served as well as those providing the service.

— Lauren Schmidt is a shareholder and Kristin Stork is the director of community relations at Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck.