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Phone: +1 646 783 7100 | Fax: +1 646 783 7161 | customerservice@law360.com

Female Attys Turn To Poker To Help Stack Client Deck

By **Kelly Rizzetta**

Law360, New York (December 10, 2012, 9:24 PM ET) -- "The poker table is the new golf course ... and if you want to be in the game, you have to be at the table."

That's how Ellen Leikind, founder of the corporate skill-building group Poker Prima Divas, kicked off the recent Ladies' Poker Night that Pryor Cashman LLP hosted for its women attorneys and their female clients at the firm's Times Square headquarters last week.

About 60 professionals turned out for the Pryor Cashman Women's Leadership Initiative's inaugural networking event, and while they enjoyed plenty of canapes and camaraderie, Ladies' Poker Night represented more than just a quirky cocktail hour. Guests learned how to leverage their chips for information and assess how other players' personalities affected their style of play — and, perhaps more importantly, attorneys got a chance to interact with potential clients in ways that laid the groundwork for future business relationships.

"Business development is hard for anyone, man or woman," Colleen Caden, a partner in the firm's immigration group, told Law360. "But ... women network differently than men do, so to have events geared more toward women's interests makes it easier for women to get to know one another."

When Caden moved from Fragomen Del Rey Bernsen & Loewy LLP in 2009 to establish Pryor Cashman's immigration practice, her new female colleagues started approaching her with questions about how she built her thriving business, particularly in a competitive market like New York.

"Ultimately, to move up and to become partner — and to become a successful partner — you have to have your own business, and since it's so difficult to develop that business, we figured, why not rely on each other?" Caden recalled.

Still less than a year old, the Pryor Cashman women's initiative grew out of that basic question. A steering committee formed and organized introductory lunches between small groups of female attorneys ranging from junior associates to partners. After a few formal brainstorming sessions, the group settled on Ladies' Poker Night for their first major activity and drew up a 2013 schedule that will keep them busy with many similar events.

"Poker is a tremendous networking opportunity," Leikind told Law360, noting that the game is often at the heart of social and charity events where participants would have a chance to meet and interact with clients.

Pryor Cashman's 35 female attorneys — the vast majority of whom were in attendance at Ladies' Poker Night — seem to concur. All of those interviewed reported getting excellent

feedback from the clients or potential clients they invited to the event and introduced around to their colleagues.

"Two of my clients who had to cancel at the last minute were incredibly disappointed," said Dyan Finguerra-DuCharme, a partner in Pryor Cashman's intellectual property group who also sits on the women's committee of the Bar Association of the City of New York. "They were hopeful we would do it again next year."

Ladies' Poker Night is just one of many ways women at law firms across the country are trying to make connections with their corporate counterparts outside of the boardroom or traditional male recreational settings like the driving range.

"Lots of women do enjoy golf and sporting events," said Dianne Baquet Smith, a labor and employment partner based in Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton LLP's Los Angeles office. "But we're really trying to sort of customize the [business development] process for women in our respective offices."

In its approximately 15-year history, Sheppard Mullin's Women Lawyers Group has hosted a number of events specifically designed to help female attorneys throughout the firm's 11 domestic offices build their books of business, from group trips to the newly opened Walt Disney Family Museum in San Francisco to a private shopping event at Saks Fifth Avenue in New York. All have enjoyed rave reviews from clients and high participation rates among Sheppard Mullin's 203 female attorneys, Smith said.

"Firms have recognized that more and more decision-makers in corporations are women," Smith told Law360. "A number of them have asked about the opportunity to work with women at our firm — not to the exclusion of men, but they are looking for this to be an area of commitment in the firms they're using."

But, despite major advances, many firms have yet to fully make that commitment, statistics show.

According to the National Association of Women Lawyers' latest annual survey of the top 200 U.S. law firms, women only hold about a fifth of the positions on firms' highest governing committees, and only 4 percent of the firms surveyed have women in firmwide managing partner roles. Female attorneys' median pay still trails behind their male peers' at the largest law firms despite negligible differences in billable hours, the survey found.

That makes poker an especially fitting choice for a business development group that aims to build up good karma between women attorneys and their female clients — who often face similar struggles against the corporate glass ceiling, Leikind noted.

"The men in their lives don't invite women to the poker table, whether it be professional or personal. ... Poker is typically a boys' game," Leikind said.

Yet the game offers plenty of lessons that can be useful to both men and women operating in the corporate sphere. Poker teaches participants to recover quickly from losses, identify and interpret nonverbal cues, and use the cards they are dealt to draw information out of other players, said Leikind, a marketing executive who dropped out of the corporate grind after stints at Pfizer Inc. and L'Oreal SA.

Poker also specifically promotes qualities that may not come naturally for women.

"I find that most women — and there are exceptions — most women play to avoid losing, to hold onto their chips, rather than to win," Leikind told the Pryor Cashman audience before her all-female staff started showing attendees the ins and outs of the popular Texas Hold 'Em style of play.

"I don't know whether that's hard-wiring or habit, or a combination of the two," Leikind later added. "But the prize goes to the bold."

Those concepts have been around for ages, but it helps women to explore them together through an activity like poker, which codifies the characteristics needed to succeed in an aggressive environment, according to Alice B. Stock, a partner in Pryor Cashman's immigration and labor and employment groups.

"By adding principles to what you're already doing, it allows you to come much more quickly to the point and to develop a strategy," Stock told Law360.

Plus, events like Ladies' Poker Night provide attorneys with a fun, relaxed atmosphere in which to interact face-to-face with clients they often only hear from over the phone or via email, Stock pointed out.

"When I started, no one was doing any teaching at the associate level on how to market [oneself] or encouraging [young attorneys] to really learn how to deal with clients, to speak to clients and potential clients, and yet that is so much part of the practice now," Stock said.

One of the central tenets of poker is to know whom you're playing with, since the temperament of the other people sitting at the table offers clues about how they will respond to your actions, Leikind emphasized during Ladies' Poker Night. This is an important reminder for attorneys, who must always bear in mind their audience, Stock pointed out.

For instance, if an attorney is simply filing paperwork with an immigration agency, chances are a typo here or there will not make or break the submission, Stock noted.

"It could still be approved — but I would never submit something with typos," Stock said. "Because the immigration service is not my most important audience. In that scenario, my most important audience is my client. I would never submit something that wasn't really strong, because that [submission] is them. It represents them."

That kind of extra effort is what makes attorneys stand out to potential clients. The same is true of women who have the guts and skill to sit down to a poker game with their male peers, Leikind says.

"I think [women who play poker] are respected," Leikind told Law360. "It's surprising for people at first, ... but there's something to be said for doing something not everybody else does."

That's what makes it such a useful networking tool, she continued.

"If you're one of five women at a poker event, you're more likely to meet people, to draw attention," Leikind said. "And there's nothing wrong with doing what you can do increase your competitive edge."

--Editing by John Quinn and Jeremy Barker.

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