

How to Make the Most of a Law Firm Network Membership

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Summary

- ❑ Membership in a law firm network can prove to be an effective and rewarding business development tool and professional development resource for your law firm and its members.
- ❑ Your firm should do its homework, considering which network best aligns with your firm's particular goals and interests and analyzing the costs and benefits of membership in each network.
- ❑ Ensure business and professional development success from network membership by committing to regular, active, and meaningful participation.



There is no shortage of suggested strategies for law firms and lawyers to expend their time, money, energy, and other resources to further business/client development efforts and client services support. There is also no shortage of available literature and other resources discussing many of those strategies. For our law firm, membership in a law firm network has proven to be an effective and meaningful tool.

For more than 30 years, my firm, [Carruthers & Roth, P.A.](#), a 25-lawyer firm in Greensboro, North Carolina, has been a member of [Legal Netlink Alliance](#) (LNA), a global association of independent, medium-sized (for the particular member's market) law firms. LNA has more than 90 member firms (comprising more than 2,000 legal professionals) found in more than 35 countries. There are more than 40 U.S. member firms with locations in more than 30 states. I have been Carruthers & Roth's representative to LNA for almost 30 years and have served on the association's executive, membership, and joint venture committees.

Why Join a Law Firm Network?

Potential advantages to membership in a law firm network include:

- **Better, broader, deeper service to your clients.** A good law firm network allows the member firm to better serve its clients, including by having ready referral access to attorneys in other jurisdictions (and/or with additional expertise) who can be trusted to serve its clients as professionally and competently as the referring firm does. Also, without compromising the member firm's independence, a member firm's attorneys gain access to broader and deeper legal expertise than it alone has, as well as to the "brainstorming" and other collaboration capabilities usually found only within global firms. This access and these capabilities can be used effectively to offer clients more comprehensive and sophisticated legal services than most individual firms of any size can provide by themselves.
- **Referrals from other member firms.** One potential benefit—often foremost in mind for firms considering joining a network—is the opportunity to receive client and matter referrals from other member firms.
- **Broader cooperative representation and marketing might.** Beyond intra-network referrals, networks sometimes allow members the ability to coordinate marketing efforts to attract multijurisdictional legal representation opportunities usually available only to truly global firms.

- **Knowledge sharing, continuing legal education, and professional development.** Many networks provide members with access to continuing legal education (CLE) programs and other opportunities for information sharing on practice management, professional development, and other matters that can prove to be invaluable resources. By way of example, LNA's quarterly in-person meetings (two in the U.S. and two in Europe) feature presentations and panel discussions on recent developments and trends on legal issues, practice management, and professional development, much of which qualifies for CLE credit in many jurisdictions. LNA members have access to other programs such as regular virtual firm management roundtables, webinars, and other virtual programs of interest for its young lawyers division (YLD) attorneys. These and other programs allow members to work collaboratively with other firms, including sharing best practices, keeping up on legal developments, and benefiting from the experience of others in the network. A good network also fosters opportunity for more individualized contacts between members, affording access to additional useful "sounding board" resources.
- **Exclusivity.** Some networks grant their members exclusive membership rights within their particular geographic territory, increasing the likelihood of referrals from other members of matters falling within that territory.
- **Relationships.** More on this below.

Selecting the Right Network

Once your firm decides it wants to join a network, the next question is which one(s) to join. Beyond analyzing a network's attributes and expected member benefits, consider the following items, and compare them to your other network opportunities:

- **Costs and obligations of membership.** Consider all costs and other obligations of being an active member. The cost consideration usually does not end with membership dues (and membership dues can vary dramatically among networks). Also factor in the cost of regular, active meeting attendance, as well as other potential costs and limitations of any other membership requirements, financial or otherwise. For example, will your firm's independent judgment on referrals be at all compromised by network rules, will your firm be required to meet any referral quotas to maintain its membership, etc.?
- **Fit.** Do the network and its other member firms align with your firm's practice and characteristics, such as size, substantive practice areas, client demographics, and the like? Are the network's geographic footprint and substantive reach

appropriate to allow your firm to serve its clients' needs and interests? How will this network align with your firm's other business and practice development goals? Is the network a general interest network or a niche network?

Make Your Network Membership Matter

Once your firm decides to join a law firm network, take steps designed to increase the likelihood that realistic membership goals and expectations are met. These steps can be broken into three categories: (1) those to take within your firm, (2) those to take as to participation in the network, and (3) those to take as to firm clientele and your legal services market.

Within Your Firm

- **Gain firm buy-in and spread the word.** At the outset, try to gain broad “buy-in” from firm ownership. Doing so will increase the likelihood of a successful membership. Also, provide all attorneys (owners and nonowners) with a solid understanding of the firm's network's membership and what it offers. Not doing so makes firm buy-in much less likely and weakens the prospect of realizing the desired benefits. It is a challenge for attorneys to utilize unknown resources.
- **Thoughtfully select your firm's representative(s).** Your firm representative(s) will be the face of your firm vis-à-vis other network members. Not only should your representative(s) genuinely want to actively participate in the network on behalf of your firm, but they also should have the social and practice skills and demeanor that will enhance firm goodwill within the network. That includes taking the steps discussed below. Going a step further, there should be at least one “true believer” within the firm who will favorably represent the firm within the network and will educate and advocate within the firm on the value and benefits of network membership.
- **Develop a strategy.** Consider how the firm wants to market and position itself within the network. Does it want to differentiate itself other than by location? Does the firm have particular areas of expertise not found among other firms? Does the firm have other unique attributes or relationships it wishes to publicize?

Within the Network

- **Be involved; commit to active, meaningful participation.** Do not just sit back and wait for referrals to roll in. The adage that you only get out of something what

you put in applies to many law firm network membership experiences. Your firm representative(s) should be consistently responsive, helpful, and generous with their time when dealing with network colleagues—whether the inquiry/issue at hand is billable or not. We all know that if someone sincerely and consistently cares and acts accordingly, it shows, and it makes a big difference.

- **Treat all members and their referred clients like you do your most valued clients.** (No elaboration needed.)
- **Implement your firm's network strategy.**
- **Aim to be top of mind.** We all know the business-getting value of being the lawyer who is top of mind with clients and referral sources. That same value applies to the network. A firm whose representatives and members consistently take the steps discussed above should find itself top of mind within the network. This can prove especially beneficial in those instances where the selection of counsel is not dictated by location/jurisdiction alone.

Within Your Firm's Client Base and Market

- **Promote your network membership.** Your firm's website and other promotional materials should discuss your network membership and how membership adds value to the legal services that you provide and offer to clients.

When You Do It Right

Membership in a law firm network, especially when done right, can be an effective business and professional development tool and resource. Though I am not a "bottom-line" person, our firm's network membership has proven to be financially beneficial to the firm through referrals, etc. That has been and is great, but what has been far more meaningful are the invaluable resources that the network and other members have made available to us in serving our clients and their needs. And, by far, the greatest return on my investment of time has been the very special relationships with network colleagues who have become trusted, valued friends. If your firm chooses to join a law firm network, I hope your experience is as rewarding, professionally and personally, as ours has been with Legal Netlink Alliance.



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Mike Allen is a longtime shareholder and director of Carruthers & Roth, P.A. Before joining the firm in 1991, he practiced with a major Chicago law firm. Mike's rare blend of experience over the last 40 years in contracting, counseling, negotiating, and litigation helps him provide meaningful insight and counsel to clients at all stages of their business relationships. Mike has substantial experience in preparing contracts and in counseling regional, national, and some international clients in a broad range of business and contractual relationships, including distribution, vendor, supply, and services agreements, restrictive covenant agreements of all kinds, and a wide array of IP-related agreements. Mike also represents clients in the selection, registration, maintenance, commercialization, and enforcement of trademarks, copyrights, trade secrets, and other rights. Mike also has substantial experience litigating business, commercial, and contract disputes, including those involving non-competition, non-solicitation, and non-disclosure agreements, intellectual property rights, unfair competition, and unfair trade practices. Mike also works closely with our firm's estate and trust attorneys to provide advice and representation in estate and trust disputes.

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