

Increasing LACBA Membership is Everyone's Responsibility



THE TIME HAS COME for us to have a real and serious discussion about membership.

For the past 18 months, we have been focused on making the Los Angeles County Bar Association a better organization. Some of the accomplishments we have achieved include increased transparency, revitalized and energized sections, changing *Los Angeles Lawyer* magazine to be more engaging and diverse, making LACBA itself

more diverse and inclusive, providing the sections with autonomy and encouragement to develop their own programs, turning around the fund-raising arm of the organization, developing programs that reach out to all parts of the county, offering free educational programs to our members, doing more with fewer resources, and forcing fiscal responsibility. We did all of this while developing a host of other membership benefits.

However, as we enter the second half of my one-year term as president, a significant problem remains endemic to LACBA: few take responsibility for building membership. There it is, plain, simple, and blunt. We have come institutionally to believe that increasing membership is somebody else's responsibility. This, like so many other things, needs to change.

In the 1989 motion picture *Field of Dreams*, the lead character hears a voice that repeats, "If you build it, they will come." That sums up the mantra that we in leadership at LACBA have adopted. From committee members appointed by the president and section leaders elected by their respective sections to Counsel for Justice, the board of trustees, and even the president, there is a general belief that if we build a better bar association and offer better benefits, if we are more inclusive, if we do the right thing, people will join. Unfortunately, they will not. Plain and simple, membership in LACBA is the responsibility of everyone. This means that you, reader, are also responsible.

A generation ago, a young lawyer would join a firm in Los Angeles out of law school and that firm would automatically pay for his or her membership in the State Bar and in LACBA. It was *de rigueur*. In most firms today, that is no longer the case. Many firms offer to pay for membership in one voluntary bar association; some do not even do that. Today, LACBA competes for membership in a crowded field of excellent affiliated and related bar associations. What can we do?

1) Take responsibility for membership. If you are in leadership in LACBA or have been in leadership or want to be in leadership, you should be out there getting your colleagues and friends to join. No excuses.

2) Promote the benefits of membership. We are launching a campaign in which the board of trustees and other LACBA leaders will reach out to firms to raise awareness of the many benefits of membership. With the assistance of our members in those

firms, I am certain we will draw lawyers young and old to a 30-minute onsite lunchtime presentation about the benefits of belonging to LACBA.

3) Identify which firms offer to pay for one voluntary bar association membership and work to get in front of those firms so lawyers will exercise their option by selecting LACBA. Many lawyers do not select any bar association at all and may not even know about their firm's policy.

4) Become salespeople. I am challenging every member of LACBA to bring in five new members in the next 60 days. It is not hard. If you are reading this magazine, you are interested in and care about LACBA. If you come to meetings, if you belong to a section, you care about LACBA. You are the best salespeople—not staff, not a call center, but you.

5) Reach out to lawyers who have dropped their LACBA membership in the last five years and get them interested in joining again.

6) Improve communications with the membership. This means providing members with more focused bulletins about great events. Our LACBA app is coming soon and it will allow members to design their own experience and receive information about events quickly.

7) Gain media and press attention for our good work. It is easier to promote LACBA to people who are already informed about the benefits we offer.

8) Be accountable. If you are involved in LACBA, membership is your responsibility, and all personnel and lawyers involved need to take on that responsibility.

We can no longer assume that membership development is somebody else's responsibility. More important, we cannot expect paid staff to work on membership while we sit idly by and do nothing. There are many concerned and dedicated LACBA members who have devoted considerable time to increasing membership in the last three years. Moreover, there are scores of fine lawyers who have been actively involved in LACBA for the past 25 years and still care about it. Everywhere I go, people approach me and comment on the good work that our leadership team and senior staff have done to make LACBA a better bar association. While that is wonderful to hear, it is time to start asking our concerned members what they are doing to make this a better bar association.

Let's stop talking and start doing what we can to bring in new members. Lawyers in Los Angeles County are not going to beat down our door. We must take the responsibility. ■

The 2018-19 president of the Los Angeles County Bar Association, Brian S. Kabateck, is founder and managing partner of Kabateck LLP in Los Angeles where he practices in the areas of personal injury, insurance bad faith, pharmaceutical litigation, wrongful death, class action, mass torts, and disaster litigation.