

## Teeing Up for Legal Success

How lawyers can use golf to hit a hole in one with clients. **BY HILARY BRUGGEN FORDWICH**



**N**ow that you've made it to partner, you need to start thinking about the next step: golf.

But—stay with me, here—this is not the kind of golf you might imagine. We all know that making partner isn't about resting on your laurels. In fact, new partners have to ask themselves a crucial question: How am I planning to gain and retain clients in 2007?

To a great extent, your success will depend upon your ability to achieve likability and trust, as well as your talent at reading people. As litigators learn in jury selection, knowing what makes people tick, how they think, and what makes them angry is all invaluable in the business-development process.

That's where golf comes in. In building a client base, attorneys can pick up a number of invaluable business-development tactics. So I offer what I call "boot camp" business-development courses delivering coaching on the variety of ways to keep clients and line up new ones. I also offer a session, "Business Golf 101," in which I teach attorneys and other professionals how to use the game of golf as a business-development activity. The course, which I teach at the University of Maryland Graduate Business School, is based on what I've seen during 25 years of working with professional-services firms. In those firms, I've seen the most successful partners gaining clients and strengthening existing relationships, many through the game of golf.

### WHY GOLF?

Male attorneys have long used golf for business and career gain, but female associates and partners are still underrepresented on the course. But why use golf? Because understanding and predicting behavior are such an integral part of legal work, golfing provides the perfect opportunity to establish a business bond and to get a better sense of clients and prospects.

The well-trained business golfer not only wins new business on the course but also can determine how trustworthy a playing partner is. For instance, golf allows you to ask a crucial question: How seriously does your partner take the rules? Does he

declare a "variance" from the rules or does he sneak around them? Another good indicator is whether your partner is respectful of other players during the round. Being sensitive can illustrate a person's sense of loyalty and commitment.

Additionally, clients and prospects also read their potential lawyers while golfing. Do they want to hire you? Are you trustworthy? How do you react under pressure? How diligent are you regarding the rules? Do you pay attention to your clients? Are you interested in them and therefore their concerns? Golfing with you enables them to determine who you really are, versus who you just say you are.

Over the years I've interviewed many CEOs, and each one has emphasized using golf to get a sense of their playing partners, build their companies, and enhance their careers. I do have one warning, though: Unless it is planned and played properly, business golf can actually be detrimental to business development. As I teach in both "Business Golf 101" (for nongolfers and beginners) and "Avoiding Business Golf Blunders" (for more avid golfers), the score and the quality of play are not really important.

One does not have to play like a golf professional to be exceptionally good at business golf. Actually, the level of golf skill among most business golfers is remarkably low. Most business-golf tournaments are held with a scramble format, meaning that out of the four players in the foursome, only one shot is chosen to be used, so beginners are welcome. Avid golfers frequently miss their shots, so beginners are always surprised and share with me their amazement at how frequently their shots are used.

But players can go wrong if they miss what I think of as the unique rules of business golf. As business bonding is what matters during business golf and the emphasis is on etiquette, players must understand that business golf provides a unique business culture. For those who don't golf, much of this is a mystery. That's why I was invited by the Women's Bar Association of the District of Columbia to talk to more than 100 female lawyers about how they could learn about this unique business culture, become a part of it, and use it as their male counterparts have done for generations.

Some of the unwritten rules of business golf include where to leave the cart and where never to leave it, when it is considered totally OK to overlook a rule and when it is verboten. We also talk about when to never bring up business and where one always brings up business—the “19th hole,” or the clubhouse after a round. Discussing business on the course is also totally fine, but only at the right places and right points in time, all of which need to be learned. I bring up where to stand, where not to stand, what to always say, and what to never say. I also teach a few things that I only reveal to the people who take the session: the number one way to gain likability on the course and the sure thing to avoid, as it always makes enemies.

During the session I caution new golfers to avoid thinking that it’s just about “doing deals on the course.” More importantly, it’s about bonding with others on a personal level, building trust, and passing the likability test. After all, if your prospects can’t stand a few hours golfing with you, then forget about representing them. People rarely refer business to someone they dislike.

One of the many reasons business golf is so powerful is that it literally levels the playing field in terms of gender, race, age, firm hierarchy, and other potential barriers. Once players are on the course, respect is handed out based upon each person’s personal playing behavior during the outing and how well that person knows the business-golf culture.

The National Association for Law Placement recently reported that only about 17 percent of partners at major law firms are women. Additionally, a 2001 study of top law school graduates by Catalyst, a research and advisory group for businesswomen, revealed that one of the most common reasons a female lawyer leaves a firm is feeling stalled in her career. But I have a solution to this problem. Spending four hours on the golf course with the right players not only exponentially increases a woman’s networking opportunities but also improves her access to the decision-makers—and thus is most beneficial in the partner-selection process.

### **CAREER ADVANCEMENT**

The power of golf has been integral to my own career advancement. While a national director of marketing in the United States for the accounting and consulting firm KPMG in

the late ‘80s, I was one of the few women who golfed. Because I had golfed with senior partners in the firm at corporate outings, when it came time for the board to vote on who would become head of global marketing, many of the leaders either knew me or had heard about me via other partners who golfed. Many of these very partners swayed the board vote, which endorsed me as the candidate for the international position.

Was I any smarter or more professionally competent than others? I’d like to think that they would not have promoted a dolt, because prior to golfing I had been promoted regularly. But I also like to think that the key was awareness, comfort, knowledge: I was a known entity via golf, while others under consideration were not.

### **DON’T BE INTIMIDATED**

Although pro-level ability isn’t the prerequisite for successful business golf, it’s best to plan ahead, find out as much as you can about the game, play at an appropriate level, and apply common sense throughout. And what’s the best way to learn to golf or improve your skills? Enroll in golf school during your next vacation or take lessons locally from a golf professional.

Although it’s true that you don’t want to harm your career by pushing yourself to golf over your head, don’t wait forever before jumping in. Once you’ve golfed with someone for four hours, it’s the equivalent of working with him at the office for four weeks, or serving on a board with him for four months, or running into him at networking events for four years. Golfing together can solidify a business relationship for life.

Recently, I was able to secure a major contract as the direct result of being teed up with the CEO of a global defense contractor, the largest contract in the history of my firm. If I were not a golfer, I would not have been invited that day. If I had been irritating to the CEO or tried to hard-sell him, I also would not have ended up working so extensively for his firm. Golf most definitely provides access. If my business-golf cultural knowledge, golf etiquette, and business-golf manners had not been correct, however, I would not have stood a chance.

Golf works for me; it can work for you, too.

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