



4/25/2014

Volume 17 Issue 1

“Greening’ Your Legal Practice” : Practical Steps to Responsible Environmental Stewardship

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Economist Barbara Ward said “[o]ur only choice, whatever our dogma, is to protect the Earth. This is our common progress or our common ruin. There is nothing in between.”

It is incumbent upon attorneys to help protect the earth because we are part of the problem: The typical attorney uses between 20,000 and 100,000 sheets of copy paper alone per year, much of it wastefully, resulting in environmental harm and unnecessary expense.

However, something as simple as resetting printers to print documents double sided results in significantly less waste as well as cost savings. One firm that followed this practice reduced its paper use by 1,760,135 sheets, which saved 150 trees and 61,604 gallons of water and prevented the release of 97 tons of CO2 emissions. It also resulted in a yearly savings of over \$13,000, a true “win-win” for the firm and the environment.

Discussed in this article are practical steps attorneys, their firms, corporate and government law departments, legal non-profits, and other law organizations (“firms/offices”) can take to “green” their practices by reducing office waste and costs.

Bar Association Programs

An ideal way to green your law firm/office is to take advantage of an existing bar association program. Various programs exist at the national, state and local bar levels, including the ABA-EPA Law Office Climate Challenge and Massachusetts Bar Association Lawyers Eco-Challenge.

Participation in a local (municipal or county) bar association green program is particularly advantageous because of the enhanced ability to work closely with bar staff and local attorneys in a way that enhances the local community. One such program, offered through the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association, is profiled below.

Should participation in a bar association program not be practical, your firm/office can still implement any of the bar or individual firm/office green initiatives discussed in this article.

Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association Green Initiative

Launched in 2008, the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association Green Initiative (CMBA/GIP) may well be the most comprehensive local bar program of its type in the United States.

The CMBA/GIP is coordinated by its Green Initiative Committee, composed of a broad cross section of bar association members employed at law firms/offices, as well as non-lawyer affiliates (e.g., court reporting firms). The core mission of the Committee is to promote sustainable environmental practices at law firms/offices.

The CMBA/GIP capstone is the Green Certification Program which certifies law firms/offices which adopt environmentally responsible practices. Just shy of 50 Cleveland area firms/offices are now certified. The CMBA Green Certification criteria include firm/office recycling, responsible paper use, and energy saving efforts. The criteria can be found at <http://www.clemetrobar.org/Green/>.

Recently, CMBA added a Green+ Certification level for those firms/offices that demonstrate a commitment to the environment above and beyond that required for basic certification. Green Certified firms/offices proudly display the “CMBA Green Certified” or “CMBA Green Certified+” logo on their websites and other marketing materials.

Each year, a law firm/office that has adopted new and innovative green practices is chosen to receive the CMBA Green Innovation Award – an award made of 100% recycled materials.

The CMBA Green Committee also holds an annual “Greener Way to Work Day.” On that day, all bar association members and affiliates are encouraged to take green commutes to work (public transportation, carpooling, biking, etc.). A luncheon program is held to honor those who are green certified and to present the annual Green Innovation Award.

The program includes participation by green vendors (e.g., recycling companies) which are provided booths in return for financial support for the luncheon. Local governmental entities have embraced the event, including the Regional Transportation Association, which provides discounted mass transit vouchers.

The CMBA Green Initiative Committee also created a Carbon Footprint Calculator for legal services organizations, which can be used to determine the carbon footprint per hour of legal services rendered. The CMBA published the Calculator along with other useful information – including recycling information – in the bar journal and posted it on the Committee website.

The Green Initiative Committee has also partnered with local organizations and companies to promote green activities. One such effort is its partnership with OneCommunity and RET 3 Job Corporation to reduce a significant environmental hazard – e-waste. Their Green Computing program refurbishes computers for donation to local urban schools, reducing the “digital divide” between the quality and quantity of computers used in wealthy and impoverished school systems. What cannot be fixed is responsibly recycled, with nothing going to landfills.

The CMBA promoted the Green Computing program by encouraging local law firms/offices to donate their unwanted computers – and even assisted in collecting them.

Firm/Office Green Initiatives

Law firms and offices are required – as part of the CMBA Green Certification Program – to create their own green committees to implement the CMBA certification requirements and serve as a liaison to the CMBA Green Initiative Committee.

The firm/office green committees have served as incubators of sustainable office practices which go beyond the CMBA certification requirements and are worthy of duplication by other firms/offices. Below are some examples of firm/office initiatives.

- Earth Day programs, featuring speakers, green vendors, raffles, and prizes for those that bicycle, car pool, or take public transportation to work that day. One law firm featured local grown/organic wine and appetizers at its program.
- Bicycle clubs that promote recreational bicycling and the use of bicycling as transportation to work. One law firm arranged for the free use of showers for its participants.
- Green programs in collaboration with other tenants of the same office building and the building owner. One firm's efforts led to a building-wide recycling program and a green fair in the building lobby.
- Screen saver modes for firm/office computers that remind personnel to turn off their computers at the end of the day.
- Compost programs for coffee grounds and leftover office food.
- Discontinuance of disposable cups and water bottles.
- Adoption of a "single stream" waste handling program wherein all non-food office waste is put in the same container and is separated later by the waste handling company.
- Green "give aways," such as a reusable grocery bags/totes with the firm/office logo, a BPA-free water bottle, a solar calculator or flashlight made from recycled materials, etc.), along with information about the beneficial impact of their use.
- Green newsletters and websites that include profiles of green activities and committee members, discussion of green practices in the home, and interactive postings. One firm posted a "freeboard" where unwanted personal items are offered at no cost for anyone that wants them (bikes, furniture, etc.), reducing solid waste disposal. The same firm also had an interactive posting site for ride sharing.
- Workplace contests that promote green practices.
- Educational environmental DVDs using firm/office personnel. One firm created a series of DVDs that promoted recycling and reductions in energy use both at the office and at home. The DVDs utilized firm personnel as actors in humorous but thought-provoking skits. The DVDs were shown at firm functions and posted on the firm website.

- Merging “wellness” health initiatives with green initiatives, such as firm support of a local bike ride for charity, resulting in fewer visits to the doctor and possibly lower firm/office insurance premiums.
- Reusing/repurposing/recycling litigation/trial binders. One firm instituted a program to reuse as many binders as possible, repurpose those not suitable for reuse by sending them to local urban schools, and recycle those no longer in a condition for use by anyone.

A suggested “best practice” for a law firm/office green committee is to include representatives from each occupational group (partners, associates, of counsel, paralegals, IT personnel, and legal secretaries). Staff members in particular appreciate being included in a decision-making part of the firm. If your firm/office has multiple offices, include representatives from each office on the committee and conduct meetings via video conferencing.

Finally, remember that keeping your committee events fun and interesting will increase interest and participation.

Conclusion

As Earth Day – April 22 – quickly approaches, consider it to be a fitting time to green your firm/office and become part of “our common progress” rather than our “common ruin.” Adopting even just a few of the ideas discussed above will help protect the earth and improve your firm’s bottom line as well.

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