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Campaign hopes to make lawyers more generous

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When Thadford A. Felton heard about Akina Corp.'s Generation Generosity campaign, he saw its mission of encouraging lawyers to participate in philanthropy and refocusing the legal profession as a "win-win for everyone."

"Generosity is not just about giving away time or money," said Felton, a partner and co-chairman of the commercial litigation group at Arnstein & Lehr LLP. "Generosity is a mind-set that says, 'I will suspend self-interest to serve others. I will seek to do the right thing even when I don't have an immediate payback.'

"Generosity, in a client context, is about understanding the real client need and being willing to think outside the lawyer box to be a solution to a client's problem," he said. "It is about investing in building a real relationship and being exposed to innovative ideas and best practices to serve the business need, not just the legal need."

Akina Corp., a Chicago-based legal and legal marketing firm that helps lawyers and corporations build strategic relationships, launched its Generation Generosity campaign this month.

Deborah Knupp, one of the Akina Corp. founders, who previously worked in corporate executive leadership positions, said the firm decided that one of its main initiatives moving forward would be to help lawyers change how the world views their profession.

The Generation Generosity campaign will focus on making law firms a place where clients want to come for services, she said.

"The leading firms with whom we've worked are really focused on innovation in client experience and are taking it beyond the quality delivery of legal advice," Knupp said. "They're looking at the whole client relationship as an important priority."

Knupp referred to Bryan I. Schwartz, the chairman of Levenfeld, Pearlstein LLC, as one example of a lawyer who has brought significant changes to the area of client service.

With Akina Corp.'s help, Schwartz established a client-service board and initiated a client-service pledge at his firm. He also integrated a "clients first, firm second" mission.

"Akina's focus is a 'pay-it-forward' type of approach with clients," Schwartz said. "If you do the right things in an authentic way with clients, and not sell them what you want, you will find that your career is more fulfilling."

"Deb has taught us that lawyers really want to behave like this, but we have to have the courage to believe in this approach, which we have embraced," he said.

The Generation Generosity campaign also plans to help law firms invest in professional career development so their lawyers can do their best work.

Katrina S. Christakis, co-founder and partner at Grady, Pilgrim, Christakis, Bell LLP, said her firm's founding partners are all graduates of Akina's coaching program and wanted to foster many of the principles reflected in the company's new campaign. She said that, among other changes, the firm removed the billable-hour requirement and origination credit to encourage generosity and eliminate internal conflicts among its lawyers.

"We have tried to create an environment of trust and value, for our people and our clients, and a place where people love to work and feel a sense of purpose," she said. "We hope that we have built a firm with whom clients want to associate themselves because of the quality of our work and the sincerity of our relationships and a firm that betters the larger community through kindness and philanthropy."

The Generation Generosity will also encourage lawyers to become more active in their own communities.

Knupp said that many lawyers embrace giving their legal time and talent, but are uniquely positioned to promote greater sustainability and social change.

Felton agreed that in the future successful lawyers will be more defined by their character and values than by grades and entrance exams.

"Philanthropic generosity extends beyond monetary donations and pro-bono hours," Felton said. "It is about rolling up your sleeves and getting involved."

"At best, lawyers who focus on this involvement will have a direct impact on society and, at worst, the lawyer will learn something about himself or herself that will make them a more well-rounded person and better lawyer."

This month, the Generation Generosity is supporting Hearts a Bluhm, a heart-health awareness initiative of Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Bluhm Cardiovascular Institute and Columbia College Chicago.

During American Heart Month, 100 five-foot acrylic hearts can be found along Michigan Avenue. The heart sculpture sponsored by Akina Corp. sits in front of the Wrigley Building and showcases an "I (heart) lawyers" bumper-sticker design.

Details on many other efforts, including thought-leadership dinners and an innovative giving campaign, will be announced later this spring. For more information, visit generationgenerosity.org.

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