

Power Relaxing

Women-only networking groups are springing up, bringing together professionals who face similar problems at their companies and law firms. **By Liz Valsamis**

Five years ago, Stacy Phillips and Carole Handler bumped into each other while visiting a popular Los Angeles salon. While waiting for hair appointments, the pair were at work with their red pens and yellow notepads, when the idea occurred to Handler that they should host a "power relaxation day" for their fellow women professionals at a local spa.

The two litigators planned the event on the notion that women tend to prefer spas to the golf course, which has long been the traditional place of choice for men to relax and network.

"I [suggested] that we should have an afternoon where women get together and have some relaxation and a social hour," Handler says. "Stacy took this idea and improved it."

The women decided that the first person on their invite list would be Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom commercial litigator Harriet Posner.

Handler, an antitrust and intellectual-property partner with Thelen, Reid & Priest in Los Angeles, knew Posner.

Phillips, a family law partner with Phillips, Lerner & Lauzon, wanted to get to know her better, she says.

Posner accepted the invitation and was smitten by the idea. She now hosts the event along with the other two litigators.

"I think it's a great way for women to network," Posner says. "Networking is about creating relationships and sowing seeds, and it takes some time for these things to come to fruition."

"I think it doesn't always result in business, but it results in women knowing women around town [who] do a lot of different things."

The three women host the event twice a year at different Los Angeles spas, such as Burke Williams, the Century Plaza spa and Aqua Day Spa.

The power relaxation day, usually held on a Friday afternoon, requires a spa that can close to the public for an afternoon and can host between 30 and 40 women.

After getting out of their business suits, the bathrobe-clad invitees are led into the spas' "quiet room," which is rarely quiet.

In the "quiet room," women are encouraged to mingle with one another while waiting to be called in for their spa treatments. After an afternoon of full-body massage and mineral baths, the women dress up and head to Los Angeles' Regency Club for dinner.

At the Regency, the women dine and share their professional backgrounds with one another. The varied invite list makes for interesting conversation, Phillips says.

The three women decided that they didn't just want other lawyers and clients attending the event, but women from a whole range of professions. Over the years, the relaxation day has been attended by doctors, educators, therapists, tele-



vision personalities, women from the non-profit sector and entertainment executives.

Phillips says the most popular and inspirational part of the day is the dinner segment of the event.

"To be around such smart, involved, successful and kind women — just being around that is inspirational," Phillips said. "It makes you feel that you can take on the world."

Handler says that the event's focus isn't business building, although it started out that way.

"It's mostly about networking, at this point," Handler says.

The event has a marketing component, but it's toned down by the personal nature of the spa days, according to Handler.

"This is just a way of saying thank you to people who have enriched our lives in the past year in terms of business and other contributions that they've made," she says.

Handler says that there has been an overwhelming positive response to the bi-annual event. But the guest list has to be fewer than 40 people given space considerations.

However, plenty of networking opportunities are available for women who aren't attendees of Handler, Phillips and Posner's spa days.

More and more women-only networking groups are springing up throughout the state, according to Deborah Ludewig,

a corporate partner with Pillsbury Winthrop in Palo Alto.

"Some of them are focused on financial services, some are focused on health care, some are focused on engineering," Ludewig says.

She is involved with groups like the Women's High Tech Coalition, the No Glass Ceiling Initiative and Women in Technology. All three groups work to support professional women in building their careers.

Ludewig speaks fondly of the Girls for a Change organization, which recruits women professionals to work with girls on ways to improve their communities by creating recycling programs and community gardens and organizing bimonthly graffiti and litter cleanups in their areas. The organization targets urban middle- and high-school girls in Santa Clara County.

"I've found that, when lots of my colleagues and clients go to these events," Ludewig says, "it's a huge networking opportunity."

Ludewig also works with the Bay Area's Forum of Women Entrepreneurs, which hosts a variety of networking and support groups for women chief executive officers, chief financial officers and professional services, which is open to lawyers.

The group's chief executive officer, Susan Hailey, says that lawyers are prominent and active participants in the organization, which has 300 members in Silicon

Valley.

The group is hoping to create a women general counsel group for lawyers in the area.

That effort is being led by Fenwick & West corporate partner Gail Suniga, who also serves on the organization's board of advisers.

"There's a huge number of women who work in in-house capacities," Suniga says of Silicon Valley.

The various networking groups bring together women who face similar problems at their companies and law firms. The meeting and greeting takes place at a variety of functions, including workshops and educational seminars that provide opportunities for lawyers to meet their peers in different professions.

Suniga encourages other women lawyers to get involved in these social events.

"You have to get out and talk to people," Suniga says. "You have to be where there might be people who have the same kinds of issues."

Hailey says that her organization is a way for young women to get connected early in their careers with other women.

Handler says that, while women participate in other male-dominated forms of networking, like golf, and more men are attending spas, the three hostesses don't plan on inviting men anytime soon.

"This definitely isn't a co-ed event," Handler says.