

The Value of Membership

Last August, I began campaigning for the office of President-Elect of the Ohio State Bar Association. So far, I have traveled the entire State of Ohio at least once, and have been to 14 District Meetings¹, with two months left before the elections (May 1-7) and four more district meetings to go. I have met many wonderful attorneys who have been active members of the OSBA for decades, and believe in the mission of the OSBA, “to promote justice and advance the legal profession.” While at these meetings, I cannot help but notice that our more seasoned members continue to outnumber our younger colleagues, even in the larger metro areas of Ohio.

It seems that my observations are not merely anecdotal. A recent study conducted by the American Bar Association indicates that the growth of the legal profession is on a downward trend, and voluntary state bars, like the OSBA, are experiencing a decrease in membership². Although we cannot reverse market forces, we can certainly make some changes within our organizations to adapt to a shrinking profession and technological advances that, at times, appear ominous.

First, we must instill trust and improve the public’s opinion about lawyers and the legal system. In 2017 a poll conducted by NPR, The Marist College Institute for Public Opinion, and PBS NewsHour found a decline of public trust in the nation’s institutions³. To the question “How much do you trust the Courts”, 25% answered “not very much” and 12% answered “not at all.” Thankfully, 38% answered “a good amount” and 22% answered “a great deal.” Perhaps an overreaction, but I find reason for concern. Nonprofits, such as the OSBA and OAJ, need the trust of its membership and of the public for legitimacy, effectiveness, and financial support. Even though the poll was conducted to test the public’s trust around government institutions, the election process, congress, and the media, just to name a few, legal associations should take heed as they often are partners with the Courts in delivering services and administering justice.

Second, we must remember why legal organizations such as the OSBA exist. In 1880 a group of leading Ohio lawyers felt the urgency to create standards of admission to the bar and the bench, and to maintain the highest standards for legal education, the practice of law, conduct and discipline of attorneys, and the administration of justice. Out of this urgency, the OSBA was created. These standards remain the same today;

¹ The Board of Governors is the governing body of the OSBA. It is comprised of three officers, the secretary, a representative from each of Ohio’s 18 Districts (do not correlate with the appellate districts), and three trustees appointed by the President. Each District holds an annual meeting where members of that district are invited to hear from the OSBA President, conduct business, such as the election of delegates, and hear from the candidates for the office of President-Elect.

² *2017 State and Local Bar Benchmarks Survey: Membership, Programming in the Legal Profession*, December 2017, ABA Division for Bar Services

(https://www.americanbar.org/groups/bar_services/publications/bar_leader/2017-18/january-february/highlights-from-the-recently-released-2017-state-and-local-bar-benchmarks.html)

³ http://maristpoll.marist.edu/wp-content/misc/usapolls/us170621_PBS_NPR/NPR_PBS%20NewsHour_Marist%20Poll_National%20Nature%20of%20the%20Sample%20and%20Tables_Democracy_Trust_July%202017.pdf#page=3

they transcend time, age, gender, and race. They are what makes us trusted counselors of law and administrators of justice.

Third, we must adapt to change and remember why we became lawyers. Despite this rapidly changing environment where technology continues to become more integrated into our lives, and outfits like AVVO and Rocket Lawyer enter the playground, we must not forget that the reason we became lawyers is to help people. We are counselors of law, trained problem solvers, and brilliant tacticians. We must not forget, however, that we are also compassionate and heartfelt.

Our professional organizations strive to make us better lawyers. We must take an active role, more than just paying annual dues. We must educate law students and young lawyers on the value of membership and the pride associated with belonging to the most honorable profession; because, "alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."