

Lecturing for CLE Events: Giving (and Getting) Back

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So you've got a busy practice litigating, tending to daily client needs and building your law practice. Where do you find the time to put together written materials and prepare a presentation to a roomful of lawyers looking to meeting their annual CLE requirements and, just perhaps, learn something about the law? Better yet, why?

Continuing legal education programs, from the speaker's perspective, are incredibly time-consuming and generally pay very little, if at all. Still, lecturing for CLE is almost universally considered to be an important professional growth exercise, with some firms setting thresholds on the minimum amount of time attorneys must spend on it each year. Why? Because presenting CLE programs can strategically position you in a powerful place from both the business development and case management perspective, and establish a strong personal brand that bolsters your firm's brand as well.



“Our attorneys log hundreds of hours each year preparing for and presenting CLE programs throughout the region and we fully support this effort to help improve the practice,” said Matt Wilson, my partner at Martin Law. Wilson is dedicated to attorney education in a number of ways: He regularly lectures through the Pennsylvania Bar Institute, including the major biennial “Workers’ Compensation Practice and Procedure” program; he is a contributing author to the guidebook distributed at that event (a 900-page bound textbook that workers’ comp attorneys refer to as “The Bible”); and he is playing an active and significant role in the Pennsylvania Bar Association Workers’ Compensation Law Section’s groundbreaking certification process.

“For us, it’s a no-brainer,” Wilson said. “Workers’ compensation is a highly technical field, where you face some very unique procedural issues, both in and out of the courtroom. By sharing your experience with other attorneys and asking them in turn to share with their fellow attendees, it’s a win-win. Everyone leaves better prepared for their next client, knowing what missteps to avoid, and with the satisfaction that they have helped their colleagues. Basically, by conducting CLE programs, you raise the bar for everyone’s future performance.”

I have maintained a personal commitment to delivering at least two programs per year through various outlets since I was

admitted to the bar 20 years ago. And, while two speaking engagements in an entire calendar year may not sound like an impressive number, when you consider the magnitude of the seminar – whether it is one hour or one day – and the amount of time spent assembling the materials, the visuals and the necessary research to stand before the audience as an authority on a topic (we're talking days – and I am fortunate in that I have staff members in place to assist in that material development), it's quite an investment of nonbillable time.

My personal experience, however, has been that it is an absolutely advantageous situation, whether you are presenting to competitors, colleagues, even those on the "other" side. And the time expended before the event always pays off in one way or another. There are many intangible benefits that come with being tapped to be an authoritative lecturer in the field in which you practice. There is a correlative level of respect from attorneys, insurance carriers and judges and, furthermore, a real opportunity to market yourself to potential sources of business.

Audience members I often find myself in front of, ironically, are insurance adjusters – ironic in that they are in positions of direct opposition to my workers' compensation clients. However, what I have found in teaching CLE events for such individuals is that putting yourself with adversaries in a nonadversarial setting is the educational equivalent of taking the gloves off. Basically, all of the professional fences are knocked down and you become professionals communicating with each other. And by contributing to an adversary's professional development, you suddenly take on an industry stature that elicits respect and establishes rapport across the board. In their eyes, you aren't that bad, after all.

And when it comes to delivering subject matter to attorneys who practice in the same area you do, whether you would consider them to be direct competitors (or indirect, for that

matter) is not an issue. Think about it. There is always work out there to be referred, and opening those lines of personal communication in such a positive environment is not only beneficial for everyone in the room, it is necessary. The bottom line is this: If you carry extensive experience in a field, you have a professional obligation to share that experience with others. And, as every lawyer is required to take CLE programs, when you have the opportunity to garner knowledge of the law from another's courtroom experience and represent clients more effectively, the entire legal system and process benefits. But one of the greatest benefits, when you look at the big picture of your practice, is the boost to your biography.

"The reason attorneys should teach," stressed Shannon P. Duffy, director of communications at the American Law Institute, "is because when clients hire you, they like to see that you are the sort of lawyer that doesn't take classes, you teach them. And if you teach other lawyers, you are, then, a thought leader."

ALI is an independent organization in the United States producing scholarly work to clarify, modernize and improve the law, and is made up of more than 4,300 lawyers, judges and law professors of the highest qualifications. In 1947, ALI was a pioneer of the post-admission legal education system and, through its subsidiary, ALI-CLE, brings countless CLE programs in ever-expanding technologies to state and local bar associations, law schools, law firms and lawyers all over the country, with recent work becoming international in scope.

"When you teach," Duffy continued, "it is a much lower commitment than writing. Writing an article and getting it published in a journal is a lot of effort – effort that is well worth it, of course, and you should also be writing in your area of practice. But when you write or teach, you are also creating an important part of your resume and specifically your Internet bio. In today's modern world,

people look at your Internet bio, and they can [be impressed] by the complexity expressed in just a title. Work hard at making those titles sound good. It'll make you appear to be a much better lawyer and it will help you in your marketing."

Securing opportunities to speak is easier than you might think. The Pennsylvania Bar Institute, the Philadelphia Trial Lawyers Association, American Law Institute, even private companies such as the National Business Institute and Lorman Education Services can all provide opportunities to promote your practice or hone your public speaking skills.

Some organizations have a set calendar of events each year where there is a defined pitch period to offer a topic for presentation (or offer yourself for a panel or general future speaking purposes); other organizations will accept ideas year-round. To do so, just visit their websites to check out the educational calendar and secure contact information. Prepare a one- or two-sentence overview of your presentation (to include your bio and contact information) and send that to the appropriate contact, following up a few weeks later with a phone call to ensure they received it, and determine your chances for being selected.

What's more, once you are able to secure a speaking engagement or panel opportunity with an organization, they will often contact you directly in the future for additional opportunities.

I will note that, in my personal experience, the attorney organizations themselves (such as PBI and PTLA) provide speakers with greater flexibility from a material preparation and promotional standpoint, while national, for-profit seminar companies have a fixed outline and format to which you are expected to conform. However, the latter can serve as a great proving ground if the whole speaking thing is new to you.

Once in front of the audience, there are a number of ways to

make your program a memorable one:

- Get the current state of the law, determine what the most provocative topics for discussion are and focus on them. That will keep your program current and relevant.
- Create a broad-based outline as a guideline for your talk. This will serve as a guide to take you through the duration.
- Prepare questions to ask the attendees. Audience participation is key, and discussion between people will keep everyone awake and make the teaching setting come alive. No one wants to watch someone read from the lectern.
- Bring lots of business cards and make yourself available for one-on-one questions afterward. Those connections can bring you great things in the future.

Is all this a great investment of what could be billable time? Certainly. But when you add up the long-term professional benefits and business development potential, it's a gold mine of opportunity. "