

# New Jersey Law Journal

VOL. CXC—NO. 12—INDEX 1053

DECEMBER 17, 2007

ESTABLISHED 1878

## MANAGEMENT

---

### Preparing for Year-End Reviews

Be ready to explain why you deserve a positive review

By Janet Greenberg

---

As if the end of the year was not stressful and hectic enough with holiday shopping and social events, it is also often the time when decisions are made about your future, your quality of your life, and how much money you will make. Do your best to ensure that you have some input on these subjects. The best way to have your voice heard is to be prepared to explain why you deserve a positive review and to rebut any negatives that may be hurled at you. Handle your review with the same diligence and preparation as you would any legal assignment.

First, you need to understand what attributes and factors are actually being considered when you are being judged and evaluated. While there are many variations, depending on your employer, somewhere in the mix are usually the following: writing ability; work product; accuracy; ability to analyze legal issues; communication skills; responsiveness to partner demands; judgment; efficiency in handling matters; initiative; commitment to your job; maturity;

*Greenberg, an attorney, is co-founder of Mentoring In Motion and PastTheBar.com, an online comprehensive resource to help attorneys find career satisfaction and financial success.*

personality and how you treat others; research and preparation of matters; firm contributions such as sitting on committees and recruiting; client relations; and business development and marketing. Of course, you may also be judged on some other intangibles such as nonsensical office gossip.

For those who have previously been through the review process at a particular firm, the factors considered should already be a known quantity. If going through your first review, try to find out what these factors are that will be considered. You can ask the firm's recruiting or human resources professional, the partners for whom you work, your mentor, or other associates with whom you have a relationship. Most larger firms use some sort of standardized form. Through these people, try to get your hands on one. The form will serve as a worksheet to help you prepare. In other firms, however, (especially small firms) the process will not be so formalized, and the factors considered not quite so clear. You will need to dig deeper to try to find what is important to them. You should also try to find out who does the actual evaluation and who else has input.

Now, hopefully, you know how you will be judged. The next step is to systematically build your case. This should be relatively easy; after all, you are a lawyer.

For those who have been previously reviewed by the firm, you should have an idea of what the firm considers your deficiencies. Write down what

those weaknesses are and what you have done to improve them. While the main purpose of this article is to help you prepare for your review, we must mention that during the review itself, you should always focus on the positive. During the review, focus on the things you do exceptionally well, while explaining that you are doing everything in your power to make improvements where needed. For example, if you do not have strong communication skills, tell the reviewer that you understand that this is not one of your strongest attributes, but that you have read two books, taken a course in the past year, and asked colleagues for advice during the year to help yourself get better. If your hours have been traditionally low, explain how you went door-to-door seeking assignments, how you used your available time to help the firm in other ways, how you were out developing marketing skills, or how you were out trying to get clients. Of course, you should document all the specifics (what, when, where, who, and how) as part of your preparation. Nothing irks management more than an associate being told that he or she needs to improve in an area only to have the associate do absolutely nothing about it.

Because your focus should be mainly on your strengths, write down what you have excelled at in the past. Use your finding to verify and enhance the firm's perception of you. If you are known for being a good writer, gather samples of your finest work. Perhaps a partner or client commended you on certain documents — gather those e-mails and memos, too. If you are a leading biller among the associates, try to

get data that verifies your position. The firm, undoubtedly, already knows your hours, but be in a position to remind them. The point is to know all of your strengths and have the back-up data to verify each one. Reviews are like the anniversary of an old married couple — it is a good time to remind each other why they fell in love in the first place.

Along with being able to discuss your strengths with credibility, you should know all of your successes prior to your review. These successes include both your personal successes as well as accomplishments achieved as part of a team. Gather this information and be very specific. “Our team closed 22 deals this year worth \$5 billion. We won a precedent-setting products liability case. I completed 126 estate plans. I got the firm state-wide media attention through my pro bono service representing...” and so on. As you know, the outcome will be better if you have the facts on your side.

There may be a host of things you did during the past year that have been forgotten by the firm, or not even known about at all. Many of these things may have been forgotten about by you as well. Gather all of this information. Did you pitch in at the last minute to cover depositions? Did you attend all of those boring rubber chicken dinner fundraisers that nobody else wanted to attend? Did you take the new associates under your wing to help the firm realize its investment on this raw talent? Did you drive a

box of documents to your boss’s house on your girlfriend’s birthday? Did you ghost write a marketing newsletter for the head of your department? Were you the only associate at the firm’s seminars mingling with guests? If commitment is a factor being used to judge you, it may prove helpful to unearth all of these types of contributions.

In most firms, there is an abundant amount of internal competition — whether firms will admit it or not is another story. You will be judged against others as partners judge themselves against each other. Who is the biggest rainmaker? Who has the most impressive clients? Who drives the nicest car, etc.? In your planning, try to determine where you stand amongst your peers. Are you billing more? Do you have better relationships with firm leaders? Do you get the riskier assignments? Do you get pulled in more directions from the partners than your peers? Know where you stand and use it to your advantage. A word of caution, though — do not ever disparage others before, during or after the review.

Depending on firm culture, perhaps you have the opportunity to pre-sell your review. If you do, send the reviewer a memo explaining all of your contributions in advance. This will help position yourself and let the decision-makers know where you are coming from. Do not go overboard in your memo, do not embellish, do not lie, do not brag and do not make ultimatums.

If your memo is not properly crafted, you may end up making yourself look bad. This approach is only effective if done right.

As part of your preparation, get mini-reviews during the year. Ask those for whom you work how you are doing, where you need to improve, and why they like working with you. Keep track of what you learn and act upon this information accordingly. If needed, you will be armed to discuss these interactions at your review.

Lastly, make yourself a list of things that the firm can be doing better that will in turn help you perform better. Does the flow of communication between you and your partner need to improve? If so, what can each of you do to make communication more effective? If this goes totally against your firm’s culture and is considered taboo — don’t try this. However, if the culture is truly one of open communication, have an honest discussion with your reviewer. Remember, maturity may be a considered factor. This is one opportunity to show that you have it.

In the past, if you have not done the things discussed in this article, don’t worry. The New Year is fast approaching. What a great time to do things differently. Give yourself a present — prepare for, and receive a great review, make more money, secure your future in the role of your choosing, and stay on track to reach partnership, if that is your goal. ■