

We're all in it together!

Patricia St. Peter, Catherine Colinvaux and Kathryn Hoffman discuss Zelle Hofmann Voelbel & Mason LLP's new female-focused website.

Zelle Hofmann Voelbel & Mason LLP (Zelle Hofmann), a US-based complex litigation boutique, has long been committed to diversity, recognising that powerful advocates come from a variety of backgrounds and hard problems invariably benefit from diverse perspectives and ideas. Recent years have seen a substantial growth of the firm's female lawyer population, with women now constituting almost 45 per cent of Zelle Hofmann's associates. An upswing at the partnership level has also been progressive. Most recently, the firm named two new partners and both were women: Athena Hou and Judith Zahid. While the firm is excited about its strong core of female talent, its future goals emphasise not only recruiting women and minorities, but retaining them by providing the tools and resources necessary to promote success and professional fulfillment.

To help meet these goals, the firm recently launched the 'Zealous Women' website, www.zealouswomen.com (see

Figure one). Like 'affinity groups' at some firms, Zealous Women provides a virtual meeting place for Zelle Hofmann's female lawyers and creating it, as a shared project, has given women working at the firm an opportunity to collaborate in a more light-hearted setting than more typical projects. But the site also – and perhaps most importantly – provides a forum for Zelle Hofmann's female lawyers to publish articles, to meet other women in dispute resolution (by creating a 'spotlight' on another female professional, for example), to learn more about the issues they face on a daily basis, and to network with other women in legal and related fields. The end-goal is to develop Zealous Women into a resource beneficial to female lawyers and other related professionals around the world.

An idea is born

Zelle Hofmann is a firm focused on complex areas of law such as complex

insurance and reinsurance disputes, antitrust disputes and class actions. The firm's 80 lawyers are spread across five US offices in Boston, Dallas, Minneapolis, San Francisco and Washington, DC, with an international presence through its affiliate offices in Shanghai and Beijing, People's Republic of China. As a result, the firm's female lawyers do not always have the time and energy to devote to keeping in touch and supporting each other as much as they would like. While larger firms may be able to hold regular conferences or meetings for their female staff, it is an ongoing challenge at a national litigation firm like Zelle Hofmann, where it seems some lawyers already live out of their suitcases from time to time.

Zelle Hofmann partners and long-time members of the firm, Patricia St. Peter and Catherine Colinvaux, have been thrilled to see the number of women working at the firm grow rapidly in recent years. As this growth progressed,





Figure one: Screenshots from Zelle Hofmann's 'Zealous Women' website.

St. Peter and Colinvaux sought a forum in which the firm's female lawyers could communicate among themselves about the unique challenges they face, and provide support, insight and advice to each other on a day-to-day basis. They were pleased with, and impressed by, the abundant community of female lawyers assembled at Zelle Hofmann, and wanted to do something to celebrate this community and bring it closer together. In autumn 2008, St. Peter began to wonder whether a website could be the solution to the geographic challenges of creating an affinity group in a far-flung law firm. She and Colinvaux sat down to discuss a website that would bring the women of Zelle Hofmann together and enable them to collaborate on projects across offices. They wanted to use it as a forum to discuss issues and ideas among themselves, a place to publish articles and other pieces of writing they authored, and to display their knowledge and talents to potential and existing clients. Soon, St. Peter and Colinvaux saw this as an opportunity larger than the firm itself. After some concentrated research, they found there was a noticeable lack

of websites for, and written by, female lawyers. There simply wasn't a place, online, where female lawyers could go to share their advice and expertise, and learn about the significant issues of the day relevant to their own lives. They hoped to create this place. They wanted to find a way for the firm's female lawyers to give back and enhance the legal community as a whole by providing a forum unique to female lawyers.

Bringing Zelle Hofmann's women closer together

The first challenge was to bring the firm's female lawyers together in one location. The firm holds a retreat every eighteen months. Last year was the firm's 20th anniversary, and the retreat was a big one – the lawyers met in Cabo San Lucas in Baja California, Mexico for a long weekend of business and relaxation. Early one morning during the retreat, the female

lawyers gathered together, and St. Peter explained her idea. It was well-received, and a committee was formed to begin designing the site. Although the women of Zelle Hofmann are litigators, that morning in Cabo they decided that they wanted the site to reflect not only their professional lives but also their broader role within the world. Therefore, although the site focuses on dispute resolution, there are numerous tangents – ranging from considerations of fashion in the workplace, to the bittersweet complexities of being a mother on-the-road. Zealous Women's slogan is: 'When people disagree, Zealous Women find a solution.' The website's mission statement reflects these values. It reads: "Women are many things: professionals, wives, mothers, friends, sisters and daughters. Women use their experiences in these diverse roles when they approach disputes everyday

– from a conflict between colleagues or friends to complex litigation.”

The website design committee wanted to personalise the site as much as possible and the firm’s female lawyers have done their part to make it their own. Each lawyer drafted her own biography (in a slightly less formal style than the biographies located on the firm’s main website, www.zelle.com) reflecting her own thoughts and highlighting personal and professional accomplishments alike. While the site is aimed at professionals and their professional lives, the women of Zelle Hofmann try to use it to express themselves personally, display their unique array of talents to the site’s visitors, and have a little fun along the way. Many of the female lawyers have spent time locating articles of interest that they would like to see highlighted and discussed on the website. The section of the site entitled ‘Life & Law’ has a place to discuss recent articles, from juggling a work-life balance to fashion in the court of law.

Business development opportunity

Like most firms, Zelle Hofmann has strongly emphasized business development from lawyers at all levels. Business development, however, has always been a challenging area for many young lawyers, particularly female lawyers. Young lawyers may feel they don’t have the necessary connections for business development, and may have difficulty joining new trade or other types of groups without knowing other people in the group or having extensive legal experience in that area. Women, in particular, often find that traditional means of business development do not fit their personalities and their work-life balance time parameters.

Zealous Women helps create natural business opportunities. Publication is a good way to develop recognition for one’s ideas and accomplishments, as well as creating opportunities to communicate with existing and potential clients. Zealous Women helps by providing an additional forum for published articles,

and, through the Life & Law section, by offering an opportunity for women to ‘self-publish’ their own materials. While an article written for use at a continuing legal education seminar, for instance, may be difficult to circulate widely, disseminate to clients or publicise in any fashion, the website provides a place for women to display and publish articles or other writings they have authored or co-authored.

The ‘Spotlight’ section of the website contains features on various zealous women, such as two new female partners within the firm, female executives and in-house counsel of major corporations, and United States Supreme Court nominee, Sonia Sotomayor. Over time, the firm hopes to add more Spotlights, showcasing interesting and accomplished women in dispute resolution, and also creating opportunities for the Spotlight authors to meet and interview a woman they admire. In keeping with the site’s goal of creating a broad community of female professionals, it also solicits input from its site visitors regarding ideas for the next Spotlight. The firm hopes these spotlights provide female lawyers with the opportunity to learn about other women who have succeeded in business and law, and may even inspire mentoring-style relationships to assist women working in the profession in their careers and provide helpful business development contacts.

Finally, the site provides an opportunity for Zelle Hofmann’s lawyers to highlight their own career achievements, by mentioning recent professional successes of women in the firm, such as St. Peter’s recent election as President of US Figure Skating, and the participation of the firm’s female lawyers in significant legal victories.

Serving the community at large

Another goal of the site is to provide a forum of resources for women in the legal sector and a place for communication about the unique challenges female lawyers face. Zelle Hofmann’s female

lawyers hope to attract feedback from outside the firm to enrich and improve the features on the site. The website is designed to reach out to zealous women from all backgrounds and areas of law for conversation about their professional lives. To that end, the website emphasises interaction with the community. Almost every section of the site has an opportunity for comment and a way to submit suggestions for publications relevant to women in the law, information about upcoming events and links to other articles. The website is designed to encourage feedback and accept suggestions from any visitor.

The reality of practicing law is that professional advancement can be extremely demanding for anyone, but particularly for women. Litigators, especially female litigators, face a unique array of issues due to the nature of their practice. Litigators may travel more, they may work longer and less predictable hours and they have more courtroom appearances. Zelle Hofmann truly hopes this site helps to provide a myriad of helpful information and insightful material to support each and every one of us – if even for three minutes of our daily routine. [WOMENLEGAL](http://www.womenlegal.com)

The Zealous Women website launched in autumn 2009 at www.zealouswomen.com. The women at Zelle Hofmann are always looking for ideas to keep the site interesting and improve the quality of discussion. Please visit when you have a moment and feel free to offer your feedback because, after all, we’re all in it together!

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