

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Susman Godfrey's Brooke Taylor



Law360, New York (April 11, 2014, 1:45 PM ET) -- Brooke A.M. Taylor is a partner in Susman Godfrey LLP's Seattle office and member of the firm's executive committee. She has represented both plaintiffs and defendants in a number of high-profile intellectual property and patent lawsuits.

Intellectual Asset Management magazine named Taylor to the IAM Patent 1000: The World's Leading Patent Practitioners in 2012 and 2013, and Washington Law & Politics designated her as a "Rising Star" from 2009 to 2013. This year she was awarded a Distinguished Service Medal for her work forming and sustaining the Seattle IP American Inn of Court.

She filed one of the first lawsuits brought by Intellectual Ventures, an innovator in the intellectual property world, and serves as lead counsel to Zillow in a patent case against competitor Trulia. She also served as lead counsel for inventor VSi in successful patent cases against giants Oracle and IBM and represented Paltalk in patent cases against Microsoft, Sony and Activision.

Q: How did you break into what many consider to be an old boys' network?

A: First and foremost, by coming to a firm where gender didn't matter. As a Susman Godfrey young associate, I was just another trial team member, and now I'm viewed as a leader because I consistently generate new business. The fact that I wear skirts is irrelevant.

Steve Susman has always been focused on merit. When CNBC called him about appearing to discuss a brief his name appeared on but I wrote, he told them I should handle the segment. I know how lucky that makes me. I have a lot of stories like that at Susman Godfrey.

If anything, being female has been an advantage because we like to have women on the teams to present to the jury and to the court, and there are few women who choose to have a trial practice and fewer still who emphasize patent and antitrust.

As a result, I can provide huge value to clients by bringing a different presence to the courtroom. Both of my kids made court appearances in Texas in utero as our team got ready for trial.

Q: What are the challenges of being a woman at a senior level within a law firm?

A: The challenges of being a senior woman at a law firm are the same as being a senior partner — juggling your primary duties to your existing clients with those of firm management and growing the firm's business. It also means making hard decisions and separating personal feelings from professional. As part of the firm's executive committee, I feel a great responsibility to foster the extraordinary institution where I learned to practice so that it thrives for many years to come.

As the only woman to consistently be a member of the firm's executive committee, I find my opinion valued, and it helps that I'm not shy about speaking up.

Q: Describe a time you encountered sexism in your career and tell us how you handled it.

A: The cliché of being mistaken for the court reporter is true. I once walked into a room of 20 distinguished men defending the nation's top high-tech companies. When asked if I had arrived to transcribe the deposition, I responded that I was there to take their money. Jokes can disarm the frequent situation of being the only woman in the room. But both age and gender can be turned to one's advantage by lulling an opponent into complacency. It was a great deposition.

Q: What advice would you give to an aspiring female attorney?

A: Be proactive — do more than is asked of you, and ask for more than you think you can handle.

If you don't ask, you don't get. It may be a stereotype, but I find women less willing to be blunt about what they want. This is true whether it is a plum case assignment, more work from a client, or a leadership position. We need to overcome this hesitancy because in a busy workplace, it is often easier to address an express request rather than to look for those who are quietly excelling.

Do what feels right to you. Don't be a slave to traditional expectations of women. This may be controversial, but I worked through my maternity leaves. I spent lots of quality time with my kids (and continue to), but I love what I do and felt I could manage both and would be happier that way.

Q: What advice would you give to a law firm looking to increase the number of women in its partner ranks?

A: Give women great work early in their careers to keep them engaged. I think we spend too much time trying to guess when a woman wants to step back from her career. Instead, we should give her the experience she craves and let her make those decisions, supported by the law firm with flexibility.

Then, we need to reward the women who rise to the top with compensation, continued control over their careers, and leadership. I think women often leave private practice because they think it's not sustainable. It's not easy to get there, but if you can build a successful practice, you can have a rewarding experience as a senior woman at a firm.

Q: Outside your firm, name an attorney you admire and tell us why.

A: Karen Walker of Kirkland & Ellis. I was a summer associate at Kirkland & Ellis many years ago. I'm sure Karen doesn't remember me, but she made a lasting impression on me as a woman who was respected and successful at a firm.

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