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Beating the firm boys at their own game

Drinker Biddle partner teaches female lawyers how to win in the male world, even if it means not being the nice girl.

Debra Bruno/Legal Times
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Mercedes Meyer

In figuring out how to function as a female lawyer in a male-dominated profession, some women opt for the part-time, limited-hours approach. They want a career in law, but not one that consumes or defines them. They want time with the kids and time for themselves. These are the women who happily (or begrudgingly) march along the mommy track.

And then there's Mercedes Meyer. She belongs in the camp of the women who jump in with both feet. They accept the long hours. They agree that rainmaking is part of the job. They're willing to play by the men's rules. They're ready, in short, to do

what they need to do to crack that glass ceiling without necessarily redesigning the architecture of the entire building.

Meyer certainly qualifies as a success. She's a partner in the intellectual property practice in the Washington, D.C., office of Drinker Biddle & Reath. She has a Ph.D. in virology. She can talk authoritatively about things like X-ray protein crystallography, viral vectors and supplemental protection certificates. But what Meyer really wants to discuss is why more women aren't ascending to the upper reaches of the legal world.

Her eyes were opened a few years ago, Meyer says, when she read Lois Frankel's "Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office: 101 Unconscious Mistakes Women Make That Sabotage Their Careers."

"I had an 'a-ha' moment," she says.

Thanks to "Nice Girls," she learned not to couch her statements in the form of a question, not to tilt her head when she is speaking and not to smile too much.

"I started applying things, and it was working," Meyer remembers. She had finally learned how to brand herself as a successful professional.

It's perhaps fitting for an intellectual property lawyer to talk about "branding" as a kind of self-packaging. For Meyer, it means creating an image in people's minds of a person who should be taken seriously, a confident leader -- in a sense, one of the boys.

It's not about playing jacks

The problem is that women sometimes sabotage themselves with female mannerisms that men misread as hesitancy or uncertainty. As a result, the women don't get tapped by partners to do important

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because they'd rather be playing jacks with their daughters but because they haven't learned the rules of the game.

At this point in the conversation, many people would start talking about flexible hours, telecommuting or part-time partnership tracks. Not Meyer. Instead, she is pushing women to reach the top in the traditional way: by figuring out what law firms expect and then supplying exactly that.

Take, for instance, the PowerPoint presentation Meyer gave at the 2007 spring meeting of the American Intellectual Property Law Association. At the time, she chaired the group's Women in IP Law Committee. She called the talk "How to Pledge a Sorority When Your School Only Has Fraternities, or How Female Associates Can Become Partner."

Fine-tuning one's image was a big part of Meyer's presentation. Think of the way Madonna keeps honing her public persona. But since pointy bras and elaborate dance routines are probably the wrong brand for lawyers, Meyer recommends instead a careful concoction of time-honored professionalism -- a firm handshake and deliberate eye contact -- with a determined avoidance of pre-feminist behaviors.

Translation: Don't offer to take notes, make copies or get coffee. Don't use a "questioning tonality" in phrasing questions -- it makes you sound unsure of yourself. Don't worry about whether everyone likes you. And think twice before you mention your offspring. In fact, Meyer says that women should treat the topic of children like politics or religion. Not everybody wants to hear about your kids, either.

Appearance, too, plays into the brand. Keep your hairstyle professional. Dress in a "classy" way. (There's a good chance that means no cleavage and no tight skirts.)

Little bit of potty mouth

One way Meyer honed her own brand is by taking courses with a local company, On Trial Associates Inc., that teaches lawyers how to use acting techniques in the courtroom and other venues.

"Now I'm using the linguistic patterns," she says. For instance, Meyer says, "[If] I've got the biggest management part, but I'm the only chick here, I'm going to lower my vocal tone, because guys respect women who speak in a lower tone. And if I have to use a little bit of potty mouth, fine."

Potty mouth?

In making a pitch, Meyer explains, she might say, "Look, I've worked with the guy -- he's not an asshole."

She's not passing judgment on the different linguistic styles associated with men and women, Meyer says. But we need to be aware of them. "We're all speaking in different dialects, and we don't know it."

The book club strategy

Success is not just a matter of branding, Meyer acknowledges. Besides doing top-notch legal work, women who want to make partner have to learn how their law firm operates. They need to map out a strategy for the next three to five years, preferably with the help of a mentor.

Meyer has some ideas here as well. Specifically, she helped to create a book club for the members of the Women in IP Law Committee last year. But you won't find these book club members sipping wine and sitting on chintz-covered chairs discussing "The Kite Runner." Instead, Meyer says, it's a club for "mentoring and networking." Members post comments online and, occasionally, join up for a conference call, sometimes even bringing the featured author into the phone conversation.

The first book, of course, was "Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office." The next choices fell into a similar self-help genre, including "Trust-Based Selling," by Charles Green; "The Woman Lawyer's Rainmaking Game: How to Build a Successful Law Practice," by Sylvia Coulter; "Ending the Gauntlet: Removing Barriers to Women's Success in the Law," by Lauren Stiller Rikleen; and "How She Really Does It: Secrets of Successful Stay-at-Work Moms," by Wendy Sachs. The next book on the schedule is "Never Eat Alone: And Other Secrets to Success, One Relationship at a Time," by Keith Ferrazzi and Tahl Raz. All of the books have gotten her thinking in new ways, Meyer says.

Her ultimate goal is to help her gender combine women's people skills with men's self-confidence. "It's one thing to talk about the statistics" of women in the law, Meyer says, "and another to provide the educational tools to start beating the odds.

"We have to know all our assets. We tend to underestimate our own worth." Not if Mercedes Meyer has anything to say about it.

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