



Reinventing the CBA

How We're Staying Relevant and Growing Our Membership

BY JOHN VAUGHT



What do country club homes, can openers, and professional organizations have in common? Many millennials want nothing to do with any of them. It is said that millennials have eschewed golf as a hobby and don't want to live on a golf course.¹ Property values in golf course communities have dropped. And millennials have little interest in storing canned goods (and can openers)

in their kitchens.² Thus, tuna and soup cans now come with pop-tops. Finally, millennials have a healthy skepticism about the value of membership in a professional organization. For some, it is simply a matter of cost. For others, it is uncertainty about the organization's potential to have a career-enhancing impact.

A Short History Report

Certainly those of you who have practiced law for 25 years or more will recall the days when little thought was given to joining the CBA. When I joined Holland & Hart as an associate in 1979, enrolling in the state bar was the thing to do. As a result, baby boomers dominated the CBA roster for years, and retaining members was relatively easy. At some point around the Great Recession of 2008, however, things changed. Law school admissions rose as college graduates avoided a weak job market, only to create a glut of attorneys with significant law school debt three years later.

Around 2010, with the economy still struggling, the number of unemployed attorneys growing, and bar passage rates falling, law school

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enrollment started to decline. This downward trend continued for the next seven years, ultimately hitting a 43-year low in 2017.³ During this period, some law schools closed while others dramatically and intentionally reduced the size of incoming classes. Meanwhile, competition for professional membership dollars increased as specialty bars became more popular and law school debt required millennials, particularly those running their own practices, to become more budget-conscious.

Market share in the CBA and most voluntary state bar associations has been declining at a slow and steady—but almost imperceptible—rate since the mid-1980s. The decline really started to pick up around 2015, once baby boomers had finally rebuilt their savings and began retiring in large numbers. While the decline was not as severe in Colorado as it was in many other states with voluntary bar associations, it nevertheless created challenges for the CBA. Membership dues are an association's lifeblood. "No money: No mission" is a common refrain among nonprofit organizations. Increased membership results in increased efficiencies, a mechanism that has long allowed us to keep our membership dues among the lowest in the

country. To stay the course, the CBA would need to address the troublesome decline.

A Focus on Recruitment and Retention

Thus, in 2016, CBA management and officers sat down to develop the association's first long-range plan, REFOCUS 20/20, which would guide the CBA through 2020.⁴ Overall, the plan helped the CBA sharpen its focus and adapt to a changing environment. The name of the plan is, in part, an acronym of its goals. Notably, the first goal—the “R” goal—stands for improved member recruitment and retention.

The first step in improved recruitment was to convey more relevant knowledge to prospective and new members. More knowledge, however, did not translate to more emails. Instead, we revamped and refined all of our communications and moved to a targeted approach. Our goal is for members to receive fewer emails, and only those that relate to how they engage with the CBA.

We also worked on tailoring speeches made on behalf of the CBA to the local audience. This included our presentations at local bar visits throughout the state. For example, speeches on broadband infrastructure and solo/small firm practices were delivered in outstate Colorado, where the problem was most acute. A CBA presentation in Western Colorado focused on the Colorado River Compact. We quickly learned that knowledge led to engagement, which led to satisfaction, which led to membership renewal.

We also enhanced many of our existing member benefits, and created several new ones. Among the highlights are:

- a completely redesigned *Colorado Lawyer* magazine;
- MGMT HQ, a partnership between the CBA and Affinity Consulting Group that brings law practice management resources to members;
- a yearlong welcome campaign encouraging new members to participate in CBA programs;
- Community, a technology benefit enabling members of various groups within the CBA (sections, committees, trial teams, etc.) to easily collaborate and communicate with one another online; and



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- an updated online attorney directory, Licensed Lawyer, which offers greatly enhanced search capabilities and connectivity to social media to help clients more easily connect with Colorado lawyers.

Finally, we moved to new facilities in January 2019. After more than 20 years at 1900 Grant Street, the CBA now resides at 1290 Broadway on the 17th floor. With that move, the CBA has materially upgraded its technology—particularly its audiovisual systems for remote conferencing.

In short, the CBA has significantly improved its facilities, programming, administration, and

governance over the past four years. How do we objectively know that? In an era in which young lawyers are reticent to join statewide professional organizations, the CBA is only one of two voluntary state bars out of 18 in this country that enjoyed a growing membership this past year. That reverses more than a decade of losses—and we are just getting started.

Relevance Matters

Relevancy to our members is everything. While we are not going to save golf course home values or can openers anytime soon, membership in the CBA continues to add material value to the practice of law in Colorado. **CL**

NOTES

1. Taylor, “Golf-Home Owners Find Themselves in a Hole,” *Wall Street J.* (Jan. 10, 2019), www.wsj.com/articles/golf-home-owners-find-themselves-in-a-hole-11547135191.
2. Newman and Gasparro, “The Trouble With Tuna: ‘A Lot of Millennials Don’t Even Own Can Openers,’” *Wall Street J.* (Dec. 2, 2018), www.wsj.com/articles/tuna-makers-look-to-hook-younger-consumers-1543766400.
3. Law School Transparency, Law School Enrollment, <https://data.lawschooltransparency.com/enrollment/all/#> (citing law school enrollment statistics from the American Bar Association).
4. The CBA’s strategic plan is available at www.cobar.org/About-the-CBA/Governance.