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THE TEN ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A SIGNATURE PROJECT

By Esther F. Lardent

Editor's Note: The Law Firm Pro Bono Project serves as a critical resource for major law firms – and legal departments – seeking to implement a *pro bono* signature project. In providing tailored, confidential assistance (free of charge to Member Law Firms), the Project can help firms design and implement a signature project that takes maximum advantage of the firm's strengths, dovetails with key business goals and strategies, and addresses critical legal needs in the communities in which firm lawyers and staff work and live. To access the Project's consultative services, contact us at 202.662.9236 or ttaylor@probonoinst.org.

One of the key roles played by the Law Firm Pro Bono Project is the discovery, assessment and analysis, and replication of particularly effective innovations in law firm *pro bono* practice – innovations that enhance the impact of firms' *pro bono* work while expanding enthusiasm for and participation in that work within the firm.

In its capacity as researcher, analyst, and promoter of key trends, the Project, several years ago, identified the concept of "signature projects" (sometime termed "thematic" projects) as a particularly promising model for major law firms; time and firm experience have validated the power of signature projects. The Project has highlighted the signature project concept in its publications, at its Annual Seminar, and, most critically, in its hands-on technical assistance to law firms and legal departments. As a result, a number of law firms and departments have either developed signature projects or are in the process of identifying and implementing such projects with the Project's assistance.

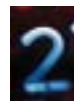
As the concept of signature projects becomes more widespread, however, there is a danger that the key elements of successful signature projects will be lost or watered down. To assist law firms weighing the creation of a signature

project, this article offers a working definition of signature projects as well as an analysis of the core features of this model.



Element One: Obtain Institutional Support

Firms that take on a signature project must make an institutional commitment to that project. That means that the law firm – through its top leadership, i.e., the firm's chair/managing partner/executive partner and/or its policy or executive committee (not simply the firm's *pro bono* committee and/or staff) – affirmatively makes a decision to create a signature project and to commit the firm's resources and stature to that project. While signature projects require a top-down commitment, securing grass-roots support is also important. Some firms, for example, have polled the firm's lawyers and staff to solicit ideas or determine areas of interest.



Element Two: Ensure Maintenance of Effort

One potential downside of the heightened focus on a signature project is the perception that other, ongoing *pro bono* commitments and activities at the firm are less important or should receive fewer resources. Signature projects should not be undertaken in lieu of existing *pro bono* commitments. Rather, the firm, in making an institutional commitment to a signature project, should strongly and consistently signal its continuing support of other *pro bono* work. No single project will engage the interest and participation of all the firm's employees, and, given the heterogeneity and vast human capital of large law firms, these firms should continue to make their skills and time available in a broad range of matters.



Element Three: Make a Major Commitment of Additional Resources

Signature projects, by their very nature, require a substantial investment of firm time and resources. They are, by design, large and ambitious in scope. Thus, these projects require not only the imprimatur of top firm leaders, they also demand an unambiguous and unwavering commitment of additional, substantial *pro bono* time. A number of firms that have taken on signature projects have made a concrete, quantifiable commitment of hours as part of that process. For example, Piper Rudnick, in taking on its special education project, committed 5,000 hours to the project's initial phase. While the time firms spend on their signature projects annually varies based on the nature of the project and the size of the firm, time commitments, to date, range from approximately 3,000 to 10,000 hours – a substantial amount, but, for the largest firms, still a small percentage of total *pro bono* time.



Element Four: Identify Targeted/Thematic Efforts

Signature projects, by definition, apply broad based strategies and approaches to targeted problems. They may be focused either on a particular legal area, such as housing and homelessness, welfare reform, or predatory lending; a discrete group of clients, e.g., children, people with AIDS, neighborhood-based child care providers, or micro-entrepreneurs; or a specific neighborhood, town or city (for example, Minnesota's Leonard, Street & Deinard sponsors a signature project targeted at addressing the legal needs of low-income individuals and the non-profit groups that serve them in a diverse, economically hard-pressed neighborhood in Minneapolis.)



Element Five: Provide Vertical Representation

While signature projects focus on a single (though often, multi-layered) issue, they do so by bringing a wide range of skills, knowledge, and tools to bear. Key to the definition of a signature project is the effort to bring disparate, but complementary, legal and other skills to bear to create the broadest and most effective solutions. The ideal signature project should offer a meaningful opportunity to serve to virtually everyone at the firm – senior partners and young associates, transactional lawyers, public policy specialists, and litigators – everyone from the firm's managing partner/chair to its messengers. While that ideal may be difficult to achieve, signature projects should take advantage of the firm's wealth of diverse expertise and should afford a teaming opportunity to those who do not traditionally work together, such as litigators and business lawyers, lawyers from different offices, etc. Dorsey & Whitney's Housing Team, for example, taps the skills of

transactional lawyers who assist in the creation of affordable housing as well as litigators who defend low-income people facing eviction.



Element Six: Address Critical Legal Needs

To be truly meaningful, signature projects should target legal issues, client groups, or communities' high-priority legal problems in a thoughtful, coordinated, and effective manner. The most important step in the development of a signature project is careful research concerning the centrality, viability, and feasibility of potential areas of focus. In conducting that research, law firms and legal departments should certainly survey areas of interest within the firm/department, but it is essential that they also seek assessments from legal services and public interest organizations and community and advocacy groups in choosing their project's thematic focus and designing the tools and strategies necessary to implement the project.



Element Seven: Find the Right Partner

One of the characteristics of signature projects is the emphasis on heightened firm ownership and administration of such projects. To facilitate the central role played by the law firm or legal department in signature projects, however, partnering with the right public interest group or groups is a must. In developing its successful project to address the needs of immigrant children in detention, Latham & Watkins partnered with a small, but highly knowledgeable immigration advocacy organization. Tapping its wealth of resources – including litigators, business lawyers, public policy experts, media and public relations people – the firm was able to take advantage of their public interest partner's expertise while leveraging that group's small staff by bringing to the table a large complement of talented lawyers and other advocates.



Element Eight: Work from Your Strengths

Locating and shaping the most appropriate signature project requires, along with the careful inquiry into critical legal needs of under represented or disenfranchised people and communities discussed above, a critical analysis of the firm's strengths and limitations. For example, a law firm composed predominantly of business lawyers would avoid signature projects with a strong litigation focus. Multi-office firms can take advantage of their presence in multiple jurisdictions by selecting a thematic focus common to several of those communities. Law firms with a strong international presence and identity can build on that strength by identifying a signature project that focuses on some aspect of international human rights.



Element Nine: Consider a Holistic Approach

Often, to promote broad based participation by a wide variety of law firm/legal department employees, signature projects blend *pro bono* with community service efforts. Including a community service component enables non-lawyers at the firm/department to take the lead in one aspect of the project. More recently, in an effort to fully integrate all aspects of the firm/department's social and professional responsibility efforts, firm-sponsored signature projects increasingly include a charitable giving component as well. For example, Hale and Dorr's Youth and Education Initiative includes targeted charitable giving and community services projects focused on children and schools, as well as *pro bono* representation including a class action law suit on behalf of mentally ill children. This approach – blending charitable contributions, *pro bono*, and broader voluntarism and community service opportunities – creates a synergism that deepens the firm's impact on its "thematic" area of focus.



Element Ten: Get Real

Signature projects have become increasingly popular during the past year – everyone wants one! Firms should ensure that their commitment to – and involvement in – a signature project is genuine and fully realized, rather than simply a cosmetic "redo" of already existing firm efforts. Signature projects hold great promise – for law firms, legal departments, public interest and legal services organizations, and, most importantly, for the needy and dispossessed in our midst. If they are reduced to a fad or "the flavor of the month," they will fail and their promise will be lost.

Why signature projects?

They offer potentially enormous benefits to all those involved:

Benefits to law firms and legal departments

*Experience to date indicates that signature projects generate substantially higher *pro bono* hours/percentages;

*They also typically result in broader *pro bono* participation, particularly among harder-to-recruit lawyers, such as partners and transactional lawyers;

*They promote teamwork, across practice groups, levels of seniority and among offices;

*They increase the visibility of *pro bono* within the firm or department;

*They enhance morale and esprit de corps;

*They can be the source of wonderful publicity and media coverage;

*They offer an efficient vehicle for firms/departments to acquire *pro bono* expertise;

*They permit law firms/legal departments to more easily and effectively assess the impact of their *pro bono* work and the difference that work has made;

*They are highly attractive to legal departments and can form the basis of effective partnerships between law firms and these departments;

*For legal departments, signature projects that add a legal dimension to an already existing company charitable/voluntarism focus permit greater interaction with other company leaders that demonstrates the added value of legal work;

Benefits to public interest and legal services/pro bono providers

*Most obviously, an additional large cadre of talented and committed lawyers available to work on difficult and time-consuming problems;

*Different perspectives and backgrounds, and the fresh "eyes" of new blood, that can enrich and enhance legal strategies;

*The ability to access the stature and contacts of the law firm and/or legal department, a particularly important benefit in projects with a policy dimension;

*Access to a broader range of legal skills – i.e., transactional, public policy, in-depth research – that are not readily available at many public interest groups because of their size and their focus on litigation;

*Availability of non-legal staff and resources, including librarians, IT staff, legal assistants, media and public relations, publications experts, copying, messengers, etc.

*Increasingly, law firms and legal departments provide in-kind and financial support to their public interest partners in these ventures, including hardware, space, fellowships, and charitable contributions.

Benefits to low-income and disenfranchised clients

*A larger team of advocates with better resources;

*A wider range of skills, expertise, backgrounds, and perspectives;

*Better and more sustainable outcomes;

*The capacity to change public perceptions of poor and disadvantaged persons and to gain compassion and support for the inequities they face.

