

LAWDRAGON

Coston Consulting Is Elevating the Game for Young Lawyers

THEIR NEW PROGRAM IS LEVELING UP THE NEXT GENERATION OF LAW FIRM PARTNERS

By Emily Jackoway and Alison Preece



*Dr. Laura Quiros, Angelica Crisi, Michael Coston and Toni Wells.
Photo by Nick Coleman.*

Twenty years ago, the legal marketing industry was quickly evolving from traditional branding and marketing and embracing a larger focus on business development. During this rise, Michael Coston, Angelica Crisi and Toni Wells were holding key roles in the marketing and business development departments for elite law firms including Chadbourne & Parke, Dechert, and Baker Botts, and at the forefront of providing strategic support vital to law firms' bottom lines.

Now as consultants, the trio got in on the ground floor for a new concept: the idea of building a consulting firm that bridges expertise in business development and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). In 2019, Coston tapped Crisi – who previously worked with Coston at Dechert and Chadbourne & Parke – to set out to create a firm that sits at that intersection: Coston Consulting.

With business development and marketing the center of their focus, the pair knew they wanted to bring on more talent on the DEI side. Their new team members included partner Dr. Laura Quiros, a professor, consultant, and

trauma-informed DEI expert and gender and entrepreneurship expert Dr. Natalie Rock, who heads up the firm's DEI research and analysis arm. Wells joined the firm as an affiliate partner in 2021. In addition to her work at Coston Consulting, she focuses on coaching and strategy support, including working closely with Diversity Lab, the think tank behind the Mansfield Rule.

Collectively, the team's work ranges from private coaching and workshops to deep-diving, firm-wide overhauls of business development strategy and DEI programs. The latest manifestation of their work is an innovative new eLearning program that brings the team's legal marketing expertise to a wider audience.

EVOLVING EXPECTATIONS; INNOVATIVE TRAINING

Working with a broad base of legal clients gives the Coston team a keen knowledge of industry trends, and an ability to see gaps in the market. From this vantage point, they noticed that younger partners and associates are often so focused on learning their practice and being the best lawyers they can be, they are sometimes left flat-footed when they make partner and are suddenly expected to bring in business. The team has long been interested in bridging that gap, including through community coaching, one of their favorite services to provide.

"Community coaching allows younger lawyers to learn from more senior lawyers who have been through the ranks. As a facilitator in those settings, you serve as a conduit for that exchange of information and help create deep connections and relationships," says Coston.

Coston has long directed group coaching for clients, including McKool Smith. A couple of years ago, he and McKool's managing principal and chairman, David Sochia designed a business development coaching program for McKool's partners to educate lawyers on the fundamentals of business development that are rarely covered in law school. The program, which involved both group sessions and one-on-one coaching with Coston and his partners, took off – every shareholder and all non-equity partners have gone through the program in the years since. "Michael knows the industry as well as anybody in it. He's one of those rare people who not only has the expertise, but he's got the common sense to know what works for someone else may not work for me and vice versa," says Sochia. "He's able to put that all together into these bespoke programs."

Theresa DeLoach-Malivert, former Managing Director of Strategic Alumni Engagement and Client Relations at Goodwin and current Head of Business Development at Schulte Roth, shared similar sentiments. She partnered with Coston to develop an innovative community coaching program for Goodwin's Black lawyers to advance business development skills and deepen connections. The result was a success, as the program is currently in its third iteration. "If what you are looking for is a unique approach to coaching that's going to really resonate and give lawyers not just tips and tools they can use, but give them practices that they can anchor in and really execute on every day, Michael has a great way of doing that. He very much can connect with the lawyers at any level."

CREATING A TOOLKIT

There's a reason young lawyers need personalized business development training: The industry is changing, and quickly. Lawyers who have recently made partner are expected to have developed a

network both within their firm and with clients in a way that simply wasn't expected in years past, the consultants say. Part of the reason: The legal industry has transformed from a seller's market to a buyer's market in the last decade and a half. "There are more competitors on the market than ever before, and even big firms are competing against technology," Wells says.

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The interactive training program, The Elevate Curriculum, is a digital marketing and business development course designed to fill knowledge gaps in a shifting industry where a business development skillset is becoming a standard much earlier in lawyers' careers. The goal is to help partner-track attorneys build their skills in branding, marketing and building a book of business. It walks lawyers through a personal approach to building confidence and encourages a more equitable path to career advancement.

The eLearning program is split into two tracks: the Core program, a fundamental training guide designed for associates in years one through six, and the Advanced curriculum, for senior associates and junior partners. Coston, Crisi and Wells themselves are the instructors throughout seven modules in the Core program and 10 in the Advanced. Designed with a focus on engagement – especially among younger lawyers immersed in bite-sized TikTok culture – the program is a blend of short video modules, as well as quizzes, checklists and clickable activities.

Crisi adds that the program is designed for users to review again and again. "You could do this program as a fourth year and again as a tenth year," she says. Business development, she adds, "is not a thing that ever stops. You get better at it, it becomes more part of your nature, but it's not the type of thing that you could ever say, 'Oh, I've learned it all. I'm done there.'"

ADVICE FOR YOUNG LAWYERS

The consultants are passionate about meeting the moment to help young lawyers develop their marketing core competencies early on. "Our goal was to create a self-study resource for lawyers to develop their marketing muscles earlier in their career, so they're starting from a place of power," says Coston.

The team's primary advice for young lawyers focuses on developing agency – a word Wells says she's amplifying in her trainings now. She encourages young lawyers to shape their careers actively. "It's important for associates to know they have agency and can craft the career they want and leverage the opportunities and firm environment they're in – I think that's very powerful for people no matter where you are in your career," she says.

The team at Coston Consulting has been helping firms and lawyers tell their stories for decades. Now, they're focusing on helping young lawyers create theirs.