

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Liner Grode's Angela Agrusa

Law360, New York (December 11, 2013, 12:52 PM EST) --Angela C. Agrusa is a partner in Liner Grode Stein Yankelevitz Sunshine Regenstreif & Taylor LLP's Los Angeles office. Her practice includes litigation and trial work in the areas of trademark, false advertising, unfair competition, copyright, as well as other types of business disputes. She works with a diverse range of industries on intellectual property and business and advertising disputes involving consumer products and services, foods and beverages, fashion and retail, motion picture, television, and computer software and hardware, among others.



Angela Agrusa

She joined Liner Grode after spending 16 years at Baker & Hostetler LLP, where she last served as chairwoman of the litigation department of that firm's California offices and as chairwoman of the firmwide complex business litigation practice team.

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

A: I have always had a lot of grit and tenacity. After law school graduation, all I knew is that I wanted to be a trial lawyer. In my first year as a lawyer, I went to the office of every partner and senior attorney letting them know that I was so eager for courtroom experience and would be willing to attend any boring conference no matter where (glamorous El Centro, Calif., being an early stop) or argue any dog motion. Taken up on my offer, I quickly earned a reputation as being a fearless and skilled advocate and as somebody who could stand up to "the old boys."

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

A: I think the biggest challenge of being a woman in a law firm generally is balancing your personal life with your professional life. When I made the decision in my mid-30s to have children, I knew that I had to script a way for me to do both at a level that was emotionally satisfying. What this means for me is that I have to remain immediately accessible to my clients and my colleagues. I want to set an example to the younger generation that a woman attorney's commitment to her cases and clients is not diminished by her duties as room parent or library mom.

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

A: Almost every woman lawyer of my vintage has experienced that awkward moment showing up for a deposition and being asked if she was the court reporter, so I won't focus on those moments of sexism. Instead, one particular experience comes to mind.

Years ago, as a young partner, I learned that one of my male counterparts had received a larger compensation bump than I did. When I asked the managing partner of the firm I was with about it, his only justification for the decision was that my male counterpart “had a wife and kids to support.” He didn’t deny that there was not any other basis for the discrepancy.

At that point, I understood clearly the perspective of this managing partner’s generation, and rather than sit in anger or frustration, I made a conscious decision that I would navigate for myself a place at the table where firm compensation is discussed. I became head of the California litigation practice groups and from that point forward I was in every nationwide firm meeting where the compensation of litigators was discussed.

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

A: For me, compartmentalization has been the pivotal characteristic of my ability to balance my professional life and my personal life. I have seen so many women leave the law, and yet I have continued to practice full time. My advice to aspiring female attorneys is to develop a skill set that allows you to compartmentalize the two dominant aspects of life — personal and professional. Be fully present and committed to your career, but be equally careful to maintain your foundation of friends, family and community. And, truth be told, as you mature as a lawyer, your social and community networks will likely also be your business referral source.

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

A: I have always believed that if a woman attorney can survive an associate’s tenure, she’s well situated for a long career as a practicing lawyer. During an associate’s tenure, women associates are confronted with life choices (e.g., marry, start a family) and often messaged by their firm that they have to choose between career and children, for example. Unlike male attorneys beginning parenthood, women are repeatedly asked “do you plan to keep working after the baby is born.” Either directly or implicitly women are challenged about their commitment to their careers and their responses are often met with skepticism and doubt.

Law firms should eliminate bias and address women as they would their male counterparts; presume that she is 100 percent committed to her career and that she is capable of fulfilling many roles in life, uncompromised. Firms should engender feelings of support and confidence. We invest so much time and effort in training and developing young lawyers; we cannot afford to lose this valuable resource. I am most proud of the fact that at Liner Grode Stein LLP we do not ascribe to that bias, and each lawyer, regardless of gender, rises or falls on his or her idiosyncratic skill set. I like to think that we lead our business as all businesses should be lead, as a humane, adaptive meritocracy.

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

A: There are many attorneys that I admire, so it is tough for me to cull out just one. So, I’ll respond by identifying my earliest legal role model, who although denied a legal education was an epic advocate. On Halloween, at age 10, I dressed as my role model — wearing a petticoat and “Votes for Women” sash. I recall being repeatedly asked who I was by candy-givers and am sure my reputation as the neighborhood bra-burner (despite being a few years away from wearing one) solidified. Susan B. Anthony’s lifelong and passionate advocating for the social and legal equality of women, specifically for

the right to vote, were an inspiration to me. Today, I remain equally inspired by those who work to make our country's laws practical and just within the changing dynamics of a modern world.

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