The Elusive Search for Quality Legal Tech Education

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Keeping up with the juggernaut that is legal technology is flatly impossible. Even if you follow legal tech for a living, there is simply too much information to "know it all." And yet, time and again, lawyers identify legal technology as the law practice subject they are hungriest for in the CLE world.

As our friend Bill Gibson noted in his *Frontlines* column in the May/June issue of this magazine, "even educational programs that aren't about technology . . . have a strong tech component . . . Technology seems to be what it is all about." And so it is. Technologically inept lawyers are likely to fall by the wayside because there is no way they can keep up with those who use tech wisely for marketing and for making practices more efficient and profitable.

While there are some folks who try to keep up with technology by reading (that's what you're doing right now, yes?), most folks turn to webinars and live CLEs. Webinars are a great way to learn, but most of us defeat our purpose by multitasking while we are online – virtually everyone confesses that, at the very least, they answer e-mails while attending a webinar. Some do much more work than that. There is interaction in a webinar, but certainly not of the quality you find in live CLEs.

We are huge fans of live CLEs, especially when teaching audiences about legal technology. It allows for far more interaction. Being together in a room simply encourages more questions. The speakers have a much easier time establishing a rapport with the audience. And while you see some people checking their e-mail on their smartphones from time to time – and the occasional diehard who clearly came for the CLE credit and is working full bore on their tablet/laptop, most audience members do in fact pay attention. And if the speakers are engaging and display a depth of knowledge, the audience will pay rapt attention.

Here's the rub: It is HARD to find legal tech presenters who are both engaging and have in-depth knowledge. We regularly see state bar associations and other legal education groups bemoan the difficulty of putting together compelling legal technology education.

It therefore occurred to us that we might share our own experience in organizing the Virginia State Bar's TECHSHOW - a clear and ABA-approved doff of the cap to the Law Practice Division's fabulously successful and entertaining/educational conference, ABA TECHSHOW®.

Most of our readers are certainly interested in procuring high quality legal tech education and many of you may be directly involved in planning CLEs and/or suggesting speakers. At the very least, you may know the right folks to share this article with.

Some of you may know that there have been a number of conferences over the years called by various names, but most often called "A Taste of ABA TECHSHOW." These are usually one-day conferences which feature ABA TECHSHOW speakers well known for their depth of knowledge and entertaining presentations.

When we began to organize the VSB TECHSHOW, our starting point was the necessity of having ABA TECHSHOW® speakers comprise our faculty. No single state is likely to have a plethora of stellar legal tech presenters, so importing is critical.

The first hurdle is always budgetary. Bringing in speakers costs money for mileage, airfare, hotels and meals. However, it may cost less than you think. ABA TECHSHOW® speakers are generally happy to waive any honorarium and speak at these mini-TECHSHOWs on an expenses-only basis. Many times, you can find speakers who are within driving distance, avoiding airfare. For the VSB TECHSHOW, we elected to pick a faculty that was a blend of local/within driving distance and speakers we flew in.

If you budget well, you can cover the speaker expenses from the monies derived from CLE fees. In our case, Virginia is directed by our Supreme Court to provide

three no-charge CLEs annually directed to solo and small law firms (though anyone can come) each year and the Bar itself funds those conferences. Few bars are able to fund such conferences, which means that registration fees should indeed cover the costs of bringing in national talent.

In general, you can get speakers to present twice at a one day session, maximizing your use of money. More than that and any speaker can become wearisome to the crowd!

The next question is whether you should have one or more tracks. Here's the fundamental problem with a one track conference. Not all the animals want to feed at the same trough. For instance, if you don't use a Mac, a "Mac for Lawyers" session won't work well if all sessions are plenary sessions. If you don't have an Android, "Android Apps for Lawyers" won't have any appeal. You can try to develop a program where all the sessions have common allure, but this is hard – and leaves out many sessions that people really want to attend.

So we decided to have two tracks, which allowed us the freedom to schedule sessions that had great appeal but not mass appeal, including a Mac and an iPad session. We knew from previous experience that attendees would be perfectly happy with inexpensive box lunches and cookies in the afternoon. Coffee is mandatory, especially when technology is the subject. Yes, we know how much it costs, but it really is essential.

In the end, we had 340 attendees and over 100 on the waiting list. We choose Richmond as the site because it is roughly in the middle of the state. People came from across the Commonwealth. We had Supreme Court Justice Cleo Powell make the opening remarks – always a great hit to have a judge do this – and she revved the crowd up with "Star Trek" allusions. They were now ready for education at warp speed.

To say that the Conference was successful is a vast understatement. Comments ranged from "This is the best CLE I have ever attended" to "This day changed my life" to "I've never seen so many awesome speakers." Truly, the praise was overwhelming.

Sooo - How can you organize a conference like the VSB TECHSHOW? The ABA TECHSHOW® Board is happy to assist – they can provide you with names of speakers who aren't too far from your location as well as helpful tips to guide you along the way. The speakers themselves are all savvy at organizing conferences and will cheerfully lend a hand. Your can reach out to the current Board Chair, Brett Burney, at burney@burneyconsultants.com.

This sort of conference is generally best given by a bar or bar association of some size given the logistics, but it simply is not as hard you might imagine. In Virginia, we decided not to have an Expo (since this was our first time organizing everything else), but you could certainly do that to obtain sponsorship monies. It was important to have one staff member handling all the details, but that was all it took – and it certainly wasn't a full time job until the conference was almost upon us.

The vote of the attendees was unanimous – please do this again!

Given the reviews, we hope you've found this article useful – if you're not a conference-organizer type yourself, get this into the hands of someone who is and your bar too can go "where no one has gone before." Just stock up on those dilithium crystals!

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