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DIVERSITY|IN ACTION

Race Matters

Associates **of color** can't get away with a lack of **professionalism**.

BY KATHERINE FRINK-HAMLETT

As a South Asian male at a second-tier law school, I was initially concerned that I would not be able to secure a summer associate position with a major law firm. Since my first-year grades were very good, I was able to land on my feet and obtained a spot with a great firm.

While I am extremely excited about the opportunity, I am also a little nervous. The firm's summer class is large so I expect that the competition may be intense. Also, most of the summer associates are from top law schools, including the other South Asians, of which there are only a few.

Before I started, some of my law school friends were speaking casually and joked that I wouldn't have to worry about an offer since large firms almost always give offers, especially to people of color. But, I am not so sure—my law school is respected but it certainly isn't the best. Plus, I wonder how being South Asian will play into the evaluation process.

Is there anything in particular that I should do to make sure that I receive an offer? How do I distinguish myself?

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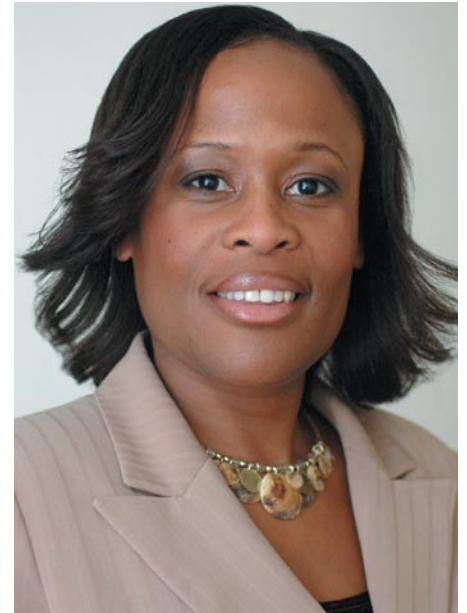
Relax—not to worry. Around this time of year there is substantial discussion surrounding the “dos” and “don'ts” of being a successful summer associate. While several bear repeating, there are a few strategies that apply to all but are of greater relevance to associates of color.

I do not believe that summer associates of color are evaluated differently. You are certainly not granted an automatic offer so forget that baseless theory. However, it would be completely disingenuous to represent that race and/or ethnicity are completely neutral factors. They are not and never have been.

Even though there are quantitative and qualitative changes that have occurred within the legal community that permit access to opportunities that have been historically denied, it doesn't mean that these changes translate into a shift of the relative balance of power, which has tilted slightly but not determinatively.

We have greater numbers of women and diverse partners so the environment is more inclusive, but not to the point where inclusion means that presumptions have been eliminated.

At the risk of stirring up the pot, I think that as a South Asian summer



PHOTOGRAPH BY RICK KOPSTEIN

associate you will be ascribed a greater presumption of validity than some other racial groups. But, presumptions are always limiting and rarely provide safe harbor.

At the end of the day, you will be more noticeable and as a result, there are some things that you can't get away with that others may be able to take for granted. No need to be paranoid—just be aware.

Specifically, your primary focus for the summer and throughout your career falls into two main categories: (1) developing impeccable professionalism, and (2) establishing and maintaining relationships with people who value your skills and can help you navigate your career.

The latter is crucial. Below are a few thoughts you may wish to consider:

Inspire confidence. This is a catchall phrase that embodies a wide range of professional behavior designed to give your peers, subordinates and superiors the sense

that you are capable of doing excellent work and making sound judgments. Although ubiquitous, these guidelines are frequently overlooked by summer associates so reiteration is essential:

- **Be prompt (not on time).** Arrive five to eight minutes early. Do not be extremely early because it will appear that you have too much extra time on your hands. Allow for inevitable contingencies when gauging your arrival time: security checks, elevator time, time to pick up coffee, etc.

- **Submit final form drafts.** An absolute must—no exceptions. The research must be complete and thorough with cites and references in proper form. The draft must be devoid of grammatical and typographical errors. Even if you are not a great writer, the text should be technically proficient. Here's a suggestion: Conduct a "line-by-line" proof. Close your office door or go to an empty conference room to eliminate distractions. Using a ruler, review and read each line of the draft one at a time. Ideally, any revisions should be marked and made simultaneously. This method is a great way to catch easily overlooked errors (e.g., "it's" versus "its").

- **Be prepared.** Arrive at meetings with a pen and legal pad in hand, prepared to take notes. Retain the information in case you need to refer to it later in the summer or someone needs to refer to it when you return to law school. When given an assignment, repeat the instructions to make sure that you understand them. Ask relevant questions but do not manufacture inquiries just to appear interested—it is so transparent. Inquire and make use of the firm's knowledge management systems.

- **Be well dressed—and well groomed.** If you're not sure, retail clothing stores have consultants who are eager to assist. Remember that business casual is business first, casual second.

Socialize. Unless an assignment deadline prevents you from doing so, make every effort to attend the firm's

social functions. Even if you are a self-described introvert, it's critical that the firm be able to evaluate your social behavior. Increasingly, interpersonal skills are a great indicator of overall professional performance. Also, think about getting a group of summer associates together outside of the firm.

Learn how to make mistakes. No one has a mistake-free career, absolutely no one. The key is to learn *how* to make mistakes and how not to repeat them. If you make a mistake (and you will), acknowledge it immediately, correct it and move on. I'm not big on apologies but if you feel compelled to apologize then do so—just keep it short and sugar free.

Be kind to everyone, especially support staff. Don't forget "please" and "thank you"—manners and politeness do matter.

Don't accept your offer on the spot. You may want to—but don't, Be thankful, be gracious and respond within the time frame provided. You owe it to yourself and your career to contrast and compare before accepting any offer. You will have to live with your choice for awhile. If you don't receive an offer, negotiate a phantom offer (extended but not to be accepted).

Spend time at other office locations. Even within the same law firm, office environments can be dramatically different. Take time to experience the breadth of the firm's culture.

Get a business card. Yes, get one and keep it until you obtain full-time employment as an attorney. The card should contain your name, contact telephone number and e-mail address. Some law schools have policies regarding student use of business cards so make sure to check with administrators first.

Read! The business happenings of the firm's clients are regularly reported. With time at a premium, online services are good resources as well as digests with quick summaries.

Maintain contacts. Keep in contact with at least one partner or senior

associate throughout your third year. Don't pester—every four months is a good rule of thumb. Try to get together in person if schedules permit. Also, keep in contact with your summer associate colleagues, many of whom may become life-long friends and business associates.

Register for relevant third-year courses. Planning to do white-collar criminal defense litigation? Why not take a third-year course related to your practice area? Typically these seminars are taught by practitioners who will be familiar with the partners in your firm. It's a nice way to get early practice exposure and become familiar with the heavyweights in the area.

Exercise. The brain requires a steady flow of oxygen for optimal performance. It makes a huge difference.

Be yourself. Discard notions of law school envy. Law firms do an impressive job of on-campus recruiting and decided that you belong. And whatever you do, don't suffocate or deliberately underplay your race.

Have a great summer and good luck! •