

The 2L Conversion Gap

7 Decisions That Determine Whether Your Summer Class Returns

By Leighton A. Phillips — Founder, Enlightened Hospitality

If you have been a recruiting director for more than five years, you have watched the same hotel ballroom reception fail to convert in at least three of them.

That is not a budget problem. It is a design problem.

Big Law summer programs cost over \$40,000 per 2L in salary alone, before housing, events, and partner time. Most of that budget gets spent on activations 2Ls do not remember three weeks later.

I run Dirty Rocks. We do this for a living. Our May 5 Philadelphia event with Patrón as title sponsor sold out 121 RSVPs in 4 days. Walk-ins paid cash at the door for a free-RSVP event.

Two older women from the neighborhood walked in off the street that night. They stayed three hours. On camera afterward, they raved about the drinks, the format, and the staff — said the young men working were the most polite and well-spoken they had seen at any Philly event. They asked when the next one was.

That is what conversion looks like before anyone has measured it on a survey. The same dynamic decides offer acceptance. 2Ls choose firms emotionally and rationalize the choice in October.

The 7 decisions below are where it is won or lost. They are not about spend. They are about design.

The uncomfortable truth: the firm an associate feels emotionally pulled toward is rarely the one with the most prestigious training program or the most generous bonus. It is the firm whose summer made them feel known.

Decision 1: Reception or Experience?

Most firms book a reception. Open bar, passed apps, two hours of small talk. By Week 3, every reception runs together in a 2L's memory.

An experience has structure, stakes, and a finish line. A competition. A tasting with a judge. Anything that makes the 2L a participant.

The format you book determines the ceiling for everything else. Receptions get attended. Experiences get remembered.

Decision 2: Familiar Venue or Distinctive One?

Hotel ballrooms are safe. They are also interchangeable.

A museum, a rooftop, a converted warehouse, a working bar after hours — the venue does brand work for you before the event begins. The room is a signal: culture, confidence, modernity, exclusivity — read before anyone has spoken. The 2L is telling a story about the firm based on the room they walked into.

Choose a room that makes them text a friend before the first drink.

Decision 3: Spectator or Participant?

If the 2Ls are watching, they are checking their phones.

If the 2Ls are doing something — competing, voting, judging, building — they are present.

Presence creates memory. Memory creates preference. Preference creates conversion.

Our May 5 event drew 225 audience votes across three competing cocktails. That kind of participation does not happen at a reception.

This is the single highest-leverage decision in the stack — every other decision compounds off of it. A passive 2L in an interactive room is still passive. An engaged 2L in a hotel ballroom is still engaged. Most firms ignore it.

Decision 4: Partner Time — Optional or Structured?

Most firms tell partners to “drop by if they can.” That guarantees associates spend the night talking to other associates.

Structure it. Assigned tables. Partner-led activities. Partners as judges. Partners on teams with 2Ls, not next to them.

At every summer event, the 2L is evaluating one product: what it feels like to work with these specific partners. The relationship is the program. Design for it.

Decision 5: The Send-Off

Most events just end. Lights up, exit, taxi home.

The last twenty minutes of the night are where memory consolidates. If the night ends on small talk, it blurs into every other firm's event. If it ends on a moment — a toast, a personal handoff, a parting gift given by a specific partner — that moment becomes the 2L's most vivid memory of your firm.

Design the send-off. Most firms do not.

Decision 6: Corporate Photos or Real Moments?

Your associates are already posting. The question is whether your event is something they want to post about.

Most firms hire a photographer who shoots the same posed handshake content every year. Those images die in HR archives. Meanwhile, the 2L's own phone is producing the content that will actually reach next year's recruit class — on Instagram, on LinkedIn, in group chats.

Design events your associates choose to share. That is recruiting marketing for the next class, free.

Decision 7: The 60-Day Silence

Summer ends in early August. Offer decisions come in October. What happens in the gap is the conversion question.

Most firms quietly track offer acceptance and yield protection rates but invest almost nothing in the 60 days that determine both. A few send something — a follow-up note, an event memento, a fall reception invitation, a small gift on the 2L's birthday in September.

The firm that stays present through the gap converts higher. Every time.

What This Adds Up To

None of these decisions cost more money. They cost more thought.

The firms that win the conversion war are not the ones with the biggest budgets. They are the ones whose program design makes associates feel something specific — recognition, belonging, partnership — that other firms' programs do not produce.

If your 2025 summer program is already designed around all seven of the above, you do not need me. If three or four are gaps, you have your redesign agenda for the next 60 days.

About the Author

I run Dirty Rocks. Our format solves four of the seven decisions above in a single evening — Decisions 1, 3, 4, and 6. The other three are how your firm shows up.

Patrón title-sponsored our May 5 Philadelphia event. Their team asked about the next one before the night ended.

Next Philadelphia open event is July 26 at Fringe Arts.

If a private version of this for your summer class is worth exploring, my contact is below. If you just took something away from the framework — even better. Use it.

Best Wishes,

Mr. Leighton A. Phillips

Founder, Enlightened Hospitality

leighton@dirtyrocks.com

dirtyrocks.com