



Legal News

One-size law firm does not fit all

July 20, 2009

Businesses looking to cut costs are increasingly seeking a better bargain when hiring outside counsel. Locally based companies like the Marcus Corporation and Briggs & Stratton are exploring partnerships with small and mid-size law firms in an effort to save money without sacrificing quality.

"I think during these economic times, businesses are looking at expenses and seeing what alternatives are out there," said attorney Stuart R. Schroeder, CEO of the [Schroeder Group SC Attorneys at Law](#).

Schroeder said his nine-attorney firm has been successful in landing several new clients, including a Wisconsin-based business with more than 2,000 employees.

He said the firm routinely "auditions" for larger potential clients by giving them an idea of the services it can provide and whether they constitute a better value for the company.

"If we're a less expensive alternative, they are more willing to give us a try," he said.

"We basically ask them to give us a project," Schroeder continued. "If they like what we do, give us another. If not, they can vote with their feet."

He noted that companies are not going to risk a change just to save a few dollars. "If you don't have the quality, you can't compete."

Thomas F. Kissinger serves as vice president and general counsel for the Milwaukee-based [Marcus Corporation](#), which operates a chain of movie theaters, hotels and resorts in the Midwest. He said the recession is providing businesses with more leverage when hiring outside attorneys.

Though he prefers to work with attorneys he has a longstanding relationship with, Kissinger said the company is being more aggressive about finding the best value for its dollar, and that includes looking at smaller firms.

"[Some] big firms ... are willing to negotiate," Kissinger said. "But if not, we might go somewhere else."

Kissinger said he looks for "cost certainty." In his recent experience, some firms are more willing to quote a price and stick to it because there is increased competition for a company's legal business.

"[You] can't ever give up quality, but you can try to maintain ... it at a fair price," he said.

Patricia M. Hanz, assistant general counsel for Milwaukee-based small engine producer Briggs & Stratton, said the company has increasingly relied on smaller firms for localized real estate and small commercial transactions.

She noted that in the last few years, the company has moved away from "full-service firms" and carefully considers the complexity of the work and the skill level needed to get it done.

"If we need the top person, we'll go find the top person," Hanz said. "[But] you don't need to pay top dollar for every type of matter a firm has, so for those issues that present a lower risk profile we look for smaller firms."

'Cracking the Market'

Some smaller firms are aggressively working to bring in more business from large companies.

Michael Berzowski, managing partner of 24-attorney firm [Weiss Berzowski Brady LLP](#) in Milwaukee, said his firm is looking to "crack the market."

He expects more and more opportunities to present themselves as corporate counsel continue to deal with shrinking budgets.

“Having a firm offering to cut a company’s legal bill by 30 percent in this economic environment would be appealing, I think,” Berzowski said.

He noted that the firm is a member of LegalNetLink.net, an online referral resource for mid-size firms looking to attract larger national and international business clients.

The 21-member Intellectual Property firm Boyle Fredrickson SC also has “feelers” out to some bigger corporate clients.

Attorney Keith M. Baxter said at least two large national companies have contacted the firm “out of the blue” about potential work.

“I think clearly there is a general understanding that boutique firms are slightly more cost efficient,” he said.

Baxter said that the firm is also reevaluating its marketing strategy and whether to shift toward more specialized advertising.

In Schroeder’s view, persistence and networking is the key.

He has used referral sources such as bankers, accountants and insurance industry professionals to help get a competitive edge.

“They could be asked a question by a larger company about who do they know in the marketplace,” Schroeder explained. “We want to be the alternative to the big guys.”

Copyright 2009 The Wisconsin Law Journal All Rights Reserved

TODO: 101 N. Robinson Ave., Ste. 101, Oklahoma City, OK, 73102 |

TODO: P.O. Box 26370, Oklahoma City, OK, 73126-0370 | (405) 235-3100

TODO: 415 S. Boston Ave., Ste. 101, Tulsa, OK 74103 | (918) 295-0098