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Boutique Law Firms Offer Expertise – With a Personal Touch

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If “small” is the first thought you have when hearing the term boutique law firm, think again. While these firms might indeed employ fewer attorneys than their larger counterparts, boutique firms focus on niche areas and offer specialized services to clients who are looking for the personal touch.

“Boutique conjures images of a firm which can and does offer an unusually high quality product to a consumer with a specialized or unique need,” explained Neil S. Dornbaum, Esq. Dornbaum & Peregoy LLC’s area of expertise is immigration.

In fact, says Richard Catalina, principal of Catalina & Associates PC, to compete with large firms, boutique firms must create a market for themselves. “They establish expertise in a specialty area, or niche, and the firm becomes known for providing the highest quality service for that practice area.” Catalina & Associates is a boutique global intellectual property law firm.

Additionally, a boutique firm allows attorneys to serve their clients’ needs in an individualized fashion. Milton S. Hunter III, of Schwartz Hunter, P.C., for example, left a large multi-national firm for a boutique atmosphere. He finds that he can best serve his clients in a small firm setting that focuses on privately owned manufacturing, distribution and technology companies.

Of course, while the clients’ needs are top priority, lawyers at boutique firms enjoy more control over their own practices in a smaller firm. “I wanted to limit my services to the areas in which I excel, limit the overhead that I would have to recover from my clients and establish a distinct platform for marketing my services,” said Robert M. Mark, principal of the Law Offices of Robert M. Mark LLC, which serves the commercial and corporate legal needs of high technology and other small to medium businesses.

While certainly one size does not fit all when it comes to law firms – and there are benefits to both larger and smaller organizations -- all four of these attorneys believe the boutique law firm offers a unique option for clients. NJ TechNews gathered these four leading attorneys to discuss the benefits of choosing to engage the services of a boutique law firm.

1. Can a smaller firm keep up with the “Big Boys?” Does it have to?

Dornbaum: We view this not as a question of “keeping up” but of complementing the services available to clients in the legal field. Our relationships with mid-size and large firms are more collaborative than adversarial. Most such firms refer matters to boutiques such as ours, where specialists reside. The comfort level is there for the referring firms, because, they have confidence that their clients will benefit from top drawer service, and more importantly, it is understood that the referring firm will retain its clients for other matters. This is a win-win for both the referring and boutique firm, as well as the client.

“We keep our costs low and share these cost savings with our clients.”

– Robert M. Mark

Catalina: The issue is, more appropriately, whether a small law firm can deliver effective and quality legal services to its clients? The answer is a resounding “yes.” Size is often irrelevant – except if a client is seeking a “one stop shop” for all possible legal practice areas. Can a small firm deliver exceptional anti-trust litigation, matrimonial, intellectual property, personal injury, admiralty, criminal defense, and other legal practice area services effectively to a diverse client population on an international platform? Maybe not. But, a small firm can put together an exceptional team of legal talent in a number of practice areas. It is just that the large, mega-sized international firms can offer larger, corporate clients a “one stop shop.”

Hunter: Our technology is comparable to that of the large firms; we have the same legal resources, such as Westlaw and we have the same access to continuing legal education (which we do extensively).

Mark: Smaller firms must keep up when it comes to substantive expertise and individual attorney effectiveness. Expertise and competence are absolute requirements. That said, firm size is not determinative of the quality of the firm’s work. Indeed, there is no reason why top grade attorneys who are effective at meeting client needs – particularly needs that large firms are not ideally suited to meet – cannot prosper at small firms.

Boutique Law Firms

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2. How do you make your firm stand out from the competition?

Catalina: Simply, by being the best. If you can consistently provide exceptional legal services for your clients, the word will get out and the reputation among the legal community will distinguish the small firm from its competition, whether small or large. Most of our new clients are referred from their attorneys who have come to realize that this firm delivers exceptional intellectual property and complex litigation legal services.

Hunter: Our firm stands out from the competition because we are committed to providing the best representation possible at a fair cost. Robin

Schwartz and I are the only attorneys in the firm and we do the work. We communicate with clients on an ongoing basis.

Mark: Principally by offering a differentiated product. We seek to provide the pragmatic, cost-conscious advice of career inside counsel. Our practice is limited to the areas in which our knowledge and experience speak for themselves: the commercial and corporate needs of high tech and other businesses. We keep our costs low and share these cost savings with our clients.

Dornbaum: For over 20 years, we have limited our practice to immigration and handle predominately business immigration matters for the engineering, financial, pharmaceutical, biotech/biopharma, telecommunications industries, as well as emerging businesses within high tech industries. We are intensely focused on businesses and their immigration objectives and strategies, effectively counseling organizations in hiring, transfer, retention, termination and compliance issues.

3. For clients, what is the advantage of hiring a small firm?

Mark: Superior value, greater access to the senior-most attorneys and higher priority among the firm's clients. Businesses who chose wisely can receive top quality legal support for less.

Hunter: One potential advantage may be lower billing rates. Our overhead per firm member is much lower than that in the large firms. Our billing rates are approximately 40 percent less than those of members of large firms with comparable experience.

Dornbaum: By their very nature, the ability to both quickly and expertly to resolve immigration matters is both time and mission critical to the businesses we represent, particularly where they require transfer, hire or retention of key personnel with key technical skills. Since flexibility in hiring and transferring knowledge and talent are the lifeblood of many high tech companies, instantaneous response and correct results are demanded.

“Can a small law firm can deliver effective and quality legal services to its clients? The answer is a resounding `yes.’”

– Richard Catalina

Given our lengthy experience in IP, biotech, biopharma/IT/power systems, and telecommunications we are already familiar with the industries within which complex immigration matters are taking place and we are able to apply broad and deep industry knowledge to immigration solutions.

Catalina: A significant feature of the small firm that I call the “nimble factor.” By that, I mean that when a client needs to speak with the attorney in charge of a particular matter, the client is more likely to get through to that attorney, and, that attorney can more readily implement a different course of action that best suits the client's best interests. Why? Attorneys in charge in the small firm setting are, most often, not members of numerous committees necessary to operate and manage the large firm, there is no significant staffing hierarchy established to a particular matter, numerous other partners do not need to be consulted in order to implement a change in the representation, etc. This is the “nimble factor.” You want it, you got it – today.

4. How does your firm overcome the disadvantages?

Mark: Principally by helping our clients find professionals in areas that we do not serve, and monitoring their performance to ensure that our clients receive strong, cost-effective representation.

Dornbaum: We see no disadvantage in working within a “smaller firm.” Our shop, with 10 to 20 subject matter experts, is much more knowledgeable in the immigration practice than are subsets of other practice groups in most large firms -- which are not similarly staffed simply because their share of the practice is not large enough to warrant the allocation of so many specialized resources.

Additionally, with our collaborative relationship with other firms in the legal field we obtain referrals from mid- to large-size firms on their immigration matters. We routinely refer litigation, tax, estate planning, criminal, or corporate transactional work to mid- to large-size firms who have the specialized expertise in these subject areas. With that relationship and understanding, each firm does what it does best and retains its respective clients who are given the best service, as and when needed.

Hunter: There are no disadvantages to using a boutique firm if the lawyers have expertise in the pertinent areas of the law.

Catalina: Work harder. Like anything in life, if you are faced with a disadvantage you just work harder. That is life.