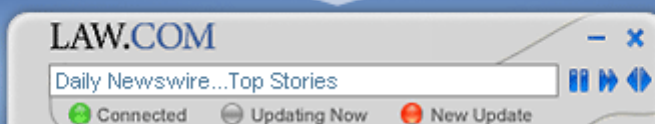


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Law Firms Look for Success Through Networking

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Many Philadelphia firms that signed up for national and international networks originally joined to add to their revenue, but they are now finding that networks offer the ability to remain independent and stave off the need for a merger.

"It's a way for the midtier firms to compete," Scott Vernick of Fox Rothschild said. His firm is a member of Great Lakes Law, now known as Lexmark International.

"The advantage is less to us, but it allows us to provide for our clients," Montgomery, McCracken, Walker & Rhoads Chairman Stephen A. Madva said. "It has some of the advantages of being a megafirm without the cost."

Madva's firm has been a member of the United States Law Firm Group since its inception in 1984. The group has since grown to include an international practice committee.

Madva said networks are useful for firms of 150 to 300 attorneys, and his firm is able to use it as a marketing tool.

According to Madva, the Philadelphia legal community has changed over the years, and the emergence of networks reflects that change.

"There was a very collegial group in Philadelphia that senior members belonged to," he said, adding that they would meet a few times a year to discuss the industry.

He said that with the open borders in today's legal market, firms need to look to other places to have a clear understanding of what is happening in the industry.

Law firm networks popped up in an increasing fashion in the 1980s and '90s with various ones created for management, specialty practices and general firms.

The cost of joining these networks could be a negative to some firms. There is often an initiation fee and then a yearly fee of at least a few thousand dollars to pay for the network administrator, staff, Web site and publications.

Most networks have several meetings a year for different practice groups or regions, and with international networks, trips to some of the destinations can become costly for a smaller firm.

Henry J. Donner, senior member of Jacoby Donner, said the cost for his 10-lawyer firm is well worth it.



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The referrals that came in to us have paid for the cost of our membership over the life of our membership," he said.

Donner did caution that it is sometimes more difficult for smaller firms to build relationships in these networks, particularly in Philadelphia, and they are not likely to get referrals in as frequently.

"It's a huge negative if they don't use [networks] right because it's a huge cost to join," said Stacy West Clark of Stacy Clark Marketing.

Clark said she urges her clients to make as much of the networks as they can by attending all of the meetings and forming relationships with the members.

She said a firm needs to do a good job of promoting its affiliation to its clients, and that doesn't mean just sticking the logo on a firm Web site.

"My clients who benefit from them really work them," she said.

Donner said the time he has spent with network members has helped him develop trust in the firms he refers work to.

Vernick said the relationships formed with other members could allow his firm to remain involved with a matter that would normally be referred out and never heard of again.

He said that initially his firm's involvement in a network was to attract business from out-of-state attorneys.

Now, he said, the firm is able to remain more involved with a client when it has work that needs to be done in a jurisdiction where Fox Rothschild does not have an office.

Bennett G. Picker of Stradley Ronon Stevens & Young was a founding member of Meritas when he was at a smaller firm and has continued the affiliation through Stradley Ronon.

"We feel we can remain a strong regional firm with certain practice areas, but even small-company clients have a need for coverage around the world," he said. "What drives the affiliation is the need for coverage worldwide."

He questioned how his firm could handle those needs without joining a megafirm or becoming a member of a law firm network.

"If you're a regional firm today and you want to remain independent, it's difficult without some national and international strategy," he said.

Picker warned that firms that join networks to fulfill that strategy have to be careful of which network they choose. He said there are many out there that are just lists.

Picker said that even if his firm never received another referral, he would remain in the network because of the advantage to his clients.

Donner said he places priority on e-mails from his network members who have helped him in several situations.

"For our clients whose businesses take them overseas, we have instantaneous referrals," he said. "I'd find an attorney in China some other way, but it would take longer."

Thomas R. Schmuhl, former chairman of MultiLaw and Duane Morris partner, said firms that join networks purely for referrals have the wrong idea. He said his membership has been the "most rewarding experience of his life" other than his family.

Schmuhl said he is on a first-name basis with attorneys in more than 70 countries because the group spends so much time together, including providing training seminars for young attorneys.

Having those relationships, he said, has gotten him out of a few difficult situations by providing fast, reliable answers.

With businesses becoming increasingly global, Schmuhl said more and more practice areas have had last-minute questions that only a lawyer who lives in a particular country may have the answer to.

According to Schmuhl, there is only so much room in the world for law firms with offices in nearly every city. He said oftentimes it is difficult to guarantee that the attorneys you man a foreign office with are truly knowledgeable about the local area.

Schmuhl said he would rather have an affiliation with a firm that had been reviewed before its acceptance into the network and can

give him firsthand understanding of the local landscape of a country thousands of miles away.

Vernick said it is not enough to simply have an office somewhere, but the office should have a connection to the community.

Frank D'Amore of Attorney Career Catalysts said that, as a former in-house counsel, he would find a firm with an office in a certain city more credible than that firm referring him to a network member.

"It would carry much, much more weight if it was a firm that has a presence there," he said, adding that he would know how that firm works.

If the firm did not have an office there and a recommendation was necessary, D'Amore said he would be more comfortable with an attorney who could confidently identify a colleague by first name rather than look it up in a directory. D'Amore said that in order for networks to carry weight with clients, it has to be clear that there are strong relationships between the network members.

Madva said the next step for his involvement in law firm networks might come in the form of joint client pitches with other members.

Schmuhl said he has done a few client pitches with members of MultiLaw.

Network membership is in no way guaranteed. Schmuhl, for example, said MultiLaw will become increasingly more strict with who it lets in and what expectations it holds with the firms. He said law firms are not static and some firms that may have been great resources when they first joined are no longer contributing.

Schmuhl did say, however, that a network cannot expect a firm in a small country to refer out as much work as a larger firm in a larger country.

Some networks will ask a member to leave if it merges with a competitor firm or if it does not meet the various quality standards.