

The Firms GCs Most Likely To Recommend

By Karlee Weinmann

Law360, New York (June 22, 2012, 6:31 PM ET) -- When it comes to shopping around for corporate law firms, general counsel chatter matters. Word-of-mouth approval is the surest way to corner new clients, and a new report says there's a group of go-to firms that is especially worthy of endorsement.

Unlike more consumer-driven industries, referrals don't come from pushing out recent victories or highlighting accomplishments — or trying to control the information flow at all. Instead, it's about cultivating relationships with existing clients, whose proverbial stamp of approval is the likeliest route to a new contract, according to BTI Consulting Group's report "The BTI Brand Elite: Client Perceptions of the Best-Branded Law Firms."

"It has very little to do with news and publicity," BTI President Michael Rynowecer said. "It's very much the clients talking to each other about which [firms] they'd go back to."

The report pinpointed Baker & McKenzie LLP, Bryan Cave LLP, Foley & Lardner LLP, Hogan Lovells, Holland & Knight LLP, Jones Day, Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP and Sidley Austin LLP as the firms general counsel most often recommend and keep on their short lists to potentially rehire in the future.

BTI conducted extensive interviews with corporate general counsel to gauge the impact of certain factors on clients' perceptions of a law firm. The group's three-pronged analysis honed in on three factors central to corporate counsel hiring choices: peer recommendation, whether the firm has a reputation for commanding premium rates and tackling complex issues, and the firm's penchant for innovation.

Each of the firms has found ways to build and maintain solid relationships with their clients, largely by applying an all-around strategy of staying in touch and providing individualized services, Rynowecer said.

When done right, firms can cash in on a solid reputation for client-mindedness — like Hogan Lovells, which the report says has "a cadre of client advocates."

"It's the ability to go further in the client relationship than other law firms go," Rynowecer said. That could mean opting for in-person visits rather than phone calls, sending personalized briefs or offering regular updates — even to let clients know their matters are on track — to reaffirm a commitment to clients and stay fresh in their minds.

Those things, however simple, are fruitful. Fifty-seven percent of executives hire a firm based on a single unprompted recommendation, according to the report, making it the single most powerful tool to draw in new business.

But earning referrals requires an intentional plan of attack, Rynowecer said, starting with asking clients what the firm can do better and providing attorneys with checklists of easy ways to improve outreach. Encouraging and publicly celebrating boosted engagement helps reinforce the significance of it, he added.

"They don't teach these kinds of things in law school," Rynowecer said, noting that implementing them "can change not only a partner but an entire firm's culture."

Bryan Cave, specifically name-checked in the report for its commitment to client service, earned its spot among the most recommended and short-listed firms by encouraging its attorneys to keep clients in mind.

"A recognized leader in client service, Bryan Cave stays in tune with clients through regular outreach and a flexible, client-friendly approach," it says.

Other firms featured as being among the most recommended and most frequently short-listed are DLA Piper, Fulbright & Jaworski LLP, Latham & Watkins LLP, Ogletree Deakins Nash Smoak & Stewart PC, Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom LLP, Thompson Hine LLP and Troutman Sanders LLP.

BTI's report is based on more than 3,100 interviews with corporate counsel and other company decision-makers, conducted over the course of 11 years. The 2012 report draws on 240 interviews conducted between late May and mid-September 2011.

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg.

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