

Greenberg Traurig Chair Takes Aim at What Makes a Truly National Firm

A national firm should be both national and a firm, Richard Rosenbaum argues in response to recent efforts by Dentons to forge ahead with a U.S. expansion plan.

By Richard A. Rosenbaum
October 15, 2019

In today's competitive, disruptive and often confusing legal landscape, it is difficult to see through branding and marketing to facts. This could be amusing except that the primary purpose of our profession is to consistently deliver excellence and value to clients, in whatever practices and locations a firm chooses to cover. Clients, lawyers and staff, and even entire law firms, are struggling to decipher the true nature of the (so-called) "law firm" structures being presented to them.

How do you share and collaborate? Is there any defined culture, or any common standards of excellence and ethics? How will conflicts of interest be cleared or are they ignored between and among constituent parts? Why will a client benefit by a firm's name being on an office when that office may be disconnected from the firm it knows and which may not deliver services at a similar level, and which may ultimately not be the best choice for their overall need?

The easiest to digest and trust is a truly unified and well-integrated law firm. These ultimately share a common culture and value system, maintain a common level of excellence and ethical



(Photo: J. Albert Diaz/ALM)

Greenberg Traurig chair Richard Rosenbaum

standards, are integrated and collaborative, and, importantly, share financial benefits and liabilities and a unified conflict and compensation system. However, many of the largest so-called "firms" in the world are not firms. They are vereins, combinations of multiple firms doing business under a common or perhaps a similar name and, subject to applicable bar rules in each jurisdiction, provide for sharing of certain costs and perhaps revenues or profits. Some hope to become unified one day but others have given up that ambition, and others do all they can to have as many bells and whistles as possible to kind of look like unified firms with

no expectation to actually become one. Then there are “legal networks,” not too different from vereins, where each member firm retains its own name and full independence, usually just referring matters within the network. Finally, we have the wide range of “alternative service providers,” usually funded by nonlawyer investors like the Big Four and providing various services.

After many years of being involved in the practice, and especially since joining Greenberg Traurig when we had only three offices and 90 lawyers, I have witnessed tremendous change in the legal profession. But to this day, I continue to believe that the basic core values of a law firm, being the trusted adviser to our clients, and delivering consistent excellence, service and real value to clients on a truly unified basis will always win the day.

Recently there has been a great deal of noise about whether it would be a good idea to create a truly “national law firm” in the United States.

We are certain the answer is yes: We embarked on this mission in 1984 when we first left Miami to spread our wings throughout Florida and continued in 1991 when we opened in New York—today our largest office of nearly 300. We began a march across the United States that continues today,

resulting in more U.S. offices (31, coast to coast, plus 10 outside the United States) than any other firm in the Am Law 10—or Am Law 14 if you are counting vereins. And we have done it as one unified firm—but in our case, uniquely competing through empowered lawyers on the ground in every local market and practice.

This is a “people” profession. We are not selling cars or software. People must be carefully selected and make their selections, know and trust each other and become well-integrated and aligned. These things don’t happen overnight—the history of our profession is littered with failed attempts to find shortcuts. In the end, the investment of necessary time and hard work cannot be replaced by some new structure or fancy slogans or marketing materials. We took decades to become a strong national firm, and then went global, but we have never forgotten to respect each lawyer and staff member or the critical importance of the U.S. legal market. We are not done getting better, never will be. And we are not done growing where we feel our clients will benefit.

Richard A. Rosenbaum is executive chairman of Greenberg Traurig.

