

Leading the Way: Greenberg Traurig's Brian Duffy on Employee Wellness and the Power of Listening

by Dan Roe

What You Need to Know

- In an interview, Greenberg Traurig CEO said his firm should finish the year with revenue and profit growth over 2020.
- His primary concerns for 2022 include retaining talent and looking after the mental health of attorneys and staff.
- Duffy said the firm's private equity and real estate practices will likely continue to grow to meet client demand in Florida and beyond.

Editor's note: Welcome to "Leading the Way," a weekly Q&A with South Florida law firm leaders about how they're navigating novel challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks for reading! We'd love your feedback, so please send thoughts and tips to Dan Roe at droe@alm.com.

As his law firm caps a year of unprecedented demand and growth in both revenue and profits, Greenberg Traurig CEO Brian Duffy still has plenty on his mind.

He thinks about expansion and contraction: Having added 10

Florida-based shareholders by August and hired more partners and associates since then, Duffy is constantly doing the math to ensure the attorneys will stay busy, and client needs met, when the market turns.

In this week's firm leader's Q&A, Duffy reflected on the pressures of a bull market, including associate retention, attorney and staff wellness, and how to prepare for the next downturn.

What's keeping you up at night?

Right now it's worrying about the health, the welfare—physical and mental—of the people in the firm, both lawyers and professional staff. Making sure people are doing OK, because we're not through the pandemic. The lasting physical and emotional toll is going to take a long time, so that continues to worry me. I get weekly reports and talk to a lot of people, and it's been very, very hard in so many respects.

The second piece is making sure we serve the needs of our clients in the middle of these major, transformative changes in the profession. Are we prepared? Are we doing the right things? What



Brian Duffy, CEO of Greenberg Traurig.

Courtesy photo

should we be doing differently?

And the third thing is we're in this period of incredible demand for more legal services—the highest level legal services—are we making the right decisions to make sure we can meet that demand and be prepared when eventually the cycle ends? Those are the three things.

How do you stay on top of the wellness of attorneys and professional staff?

One thing we have is the GT wellness program, we're grateful for what they're doing. We have professionals and that's their job, staying close to [attorneys and

staff] and doing regular calls, learning and hearing from them.

This time of year I meet with almost 500 of our partners, so lots of one on one discussions with people from October to the end of December. We're in the middle of the process so it's been lots of discussions and conversations. I think through that process you're listening as much as you can and trying to respond to what you're learning.

What are the key considerations for keeping up with client demand?

Right now, No. 1 is how you retain your best and brightest talent. You have to take care of and meet the needs of your folks who are here now, that's the thing you want to be focused on.

Two is you want to be the kind of firm that's about more than just money. Folks want to feel like they're a part of something, to have that feeling that they're accomplishing something. The money is the money but those intangible items—making sure partners are doing what they're supposed to be doing and focusing on the professional development of associates and remaining focused on people having a good experience—that will help you retain the talent you have and attract additional talent during a period of significant demand.

What's your plan for the next market downturn?

We just have to respond and follow the needs of our clients, making sure we have bankruptcy and restructuring teams in place, making sure we have the right talent available to meet the needs of our clients. And that's the key part of a law firm, to follow the demands and needs of the client, and so you think about that and try to make sure you've got those resources available.

I do think—if you're asking me from a timing standpoint—that in 2022 you're going to see significant demand for legal services. As normalcy returns to the courts, you'll see litigation pick up as well. Litigation has been busy but corporate M&A and private equity and real estate have been busier.

Which practices are you looking to expand in 2022?

I want to continue to grow our private equity practice. We want to continue to enhance real estate in certain markets. It doesn't matter how good you are, you can always be better, and that's kind of the way I think about our real estate practice.

Another thing is our D.C. regulatory practice, that's an area where we see opportunity and demand from clients picking up in 2022.

Why is that?

Because I think there's an increased regulatory focus in the current administration and clients are responding to that.

Will any cost savings you realized during the pandemic stick going forward?

I think we'll have less paper. People who were paper and pen lawyers, a lot of them became more comfortable with electronic files and editing documents electronically. You'll see office supply savings that will probably stick.

There may be some cost savings as we take on new leases and prepare for what's going to be long-term a more flexible work environment. There's going to be some cost savings in real estate that firms will realize, likewise if people are not in as much there won't be as much food and beverage and those types of things. If people are in the office less, coffee budgets will never go back to what they were before.

What's the most valuable lesson you've learned as a firm leader?

To listen more. To remain flexible and have the courage to change direction quickly and with imperfect information, to make a decision with very limited information in an uncertain and unsure environment. And I think having the courage to modify and change direction when you need to.

And that it is all about our people. The pandemic definitely put a focus on that: It is about who we are as people.

