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9 Firms Lead Way In Commitment To Help Clients

By **Pete Brush**

Law360, New York (November 16, 2009) -- They possess a keen sense of urgency and are willing to go the extra mile, say the Fortune 1000 corporate counsel who make up their client base. These nine law firms are standouts in what a new legal-industry report calls "commitment to help."

Leading the pack in what the [report](#)'s compiler, BTI Consulting Group Inc. (Wellesley, Mass.), calls a "highly subjective assessment by the client" were nine law firms including Alston & Bird, Foley & Lardner, Jones Day and Kirkland & Ellis — the top four when it came to the trait seen as key to boosting client retention.

Perhaps not surprisingly, BTI Consulting's four standouts in the "commitment to help" category were among the law firms topping the research firm's more general Client Service 30 leaders list, with Foley topping that list and the three others ranking in the top six.

The five firms rounding out commitment category's top nine – categorized by study author Michael Rynowecer as being "more dedicated to solving [customers'] problems than to billing hours" – were Baker Botts, Cravath Swaine & Moore, Holland & Knight, Morrison & Foerster and Sidley Austin.

Ninety additional firms rated a mention by corporate counsel in the commitment category, published amid what BTI Consulting characterized as a "new dawn" for law firms driven by economic factors that have corporate counsel re-evaluating relationships and "looking for firms offering the deepest understanding of their business" and the best value.

"The BTI survey is a reflection of firms that are responding quickly and nimbly to the seismic shifts taking place in the legal market. We are thrilled that the steps we are taking to reinforce our value proposition, including our commitment to being a leader in

fixed and other alternative fee arrangements, is resonating with clients,” said Rex E. Schlaybaugh Jr., who chairs Dykema Gossett PLLC, a firm that won mention in the commitment category.

Law firms prove their commitment to help in three ways, BTI Consulting said: When an attorney’s investment in a relationship is perceived by corporate counsel as greater than the client’s in the form of time, money or energy; when clients say they learn something important and valuable from a law firm, which impacts an expected outcome or solves a problem; and when a firm is seen as sharing or exceeding a client’s sense of urgency.

“I think that they would take a bullet for me,” is how corporate counsel perceive such firms, Rynowecer summarized in a recent interview.

Clients rate commitment to help as second in importance only to legal skills in driving a successful law firm relationship, the BTI Consulting report said, adding that this commitment is typically gauged at every point of interaction, from business development to follow-up on a closed matter.

"We watch this survey very carefully," Keith C. Wetmore, chair of Morrison & Foerster, said on Monday. "We're honored by the BTI ranking. It's a very well-respected survey of general counsel opinion."

Wetmore said he coaches young lawyers at his firm to “make clients' problems their problems” and also noted that many of the lawyers at the firm have advanced degrees in various scientific disciplines – from electrical engineering to biochemistry – and can take their client service efforts beyond the realm of the legal brief.

“If the topic for due diligence is a plant patent, Dr. Michael R. Ward can talk turkey with the inventor,” said Wetmore by way of example, referring to the head of Morrison & Foerster's San Francisco-based life sciences patent practice.

Steven Sonberg, managing partner of Holland & Knight, another standout firm in the commitment metric, focused on the concept of broadening ideas about what clients can expect.

"We've tried not to make our engagements one-shot deals where we don't really try to talk with them about broader issues," Sonberg said Monday. "General counsel are frequently busy and pulled in different directions, and some can't always focus on that broader relationship."

In a somewhat ironic result, Cravath Swaine & Moore and Kirkland & Ellis sat atop not only the commitment category, but also BTI Consulting's list of firms deemed by general counsel to be most arrogant.

Asked to reconcile the two apparently disparate notions, Rynowecer said some firms are known for their strong opinions and their ways of communicating them. He said

there is a segment of report respondents that doesn't necessarily want to hear those kinds of opinions.

"It's a marketplace after all — a marketplace of personalities," he said.