



Portfolio Media, Inc. | 648 Broadway, Suite 200 | New York, NY 10012 | www.law360.com
Phone: +1 212 537 6331 | Fax: +1 212 537 6371 | customerservice@portfoliomedia.com

Corporate Counsel Rank Top Firms For Client Service

By **Julie Zeveloff**

Law360, New York (November 13, 2009) -- The law firms that offer truly superior client service, according to a new survey of corporate counsel, are united by a commitment to understanding their clients' business, open lines of communication and a firm-wide zeal for keeping clients satisfied.

The [report](#), published by the BTI Consulting Group Inc. (Wellesley, Mass.), ranks Foley & Lardner LLP as the firm most committed to client service in the eyes of corporate counsel. Jones Day, Baker Botts LLP, Alston & Bird LLP and DLA Piper rounded out the top five.

The scores were culled from the feedback of 240 corporate counsel at Fortune 1000 companies. Overall, they paint a picture of which firms have been able to keep up with clients' changing needs and expectations, despite hurdles posed by the economy and a changing legal industry.

"The top firms provide more value-added information to clients," said Michael B. Rynowecer, president of BTI Consulting. "They also have good client feedback systems, where they are getting information from clients on a real-time basis, and anticipating their clients' needs."

Industry-Oriented Infrastructure and Deep Business Knowledge

One quality shared by the "A-team" is a firm infrastructure organized around industries.

Sandy Williams, a partner at Foley & Lardner, said the firm formed industry groups around 10 years ago, after merging with a health law boutique that had achieved national prominence because of its industry focus.

“We realized we had within us a number of industry-focused, experienced groups,” Williams said. “We’ve increasingly focused on particular industries, or the kinds of needs that industries experience.”

While the firm also maintains practice groups lumped by legal specialty, Williams said the dozen or so industry groups help assure clients that their lawyers understand the unique challenges within their industries.

Alston & Bird, which ranked fourth on the report's list, has also broken down many of its practice groups along industry lines.

“We hear that clients may want you to view problems and issues much more comprehensively than within the limited area in which you may be practicing,” said Richard Hays, Alston & Bird's managing partner. “We have vertically integrated teams of practitioners that understand that industry.”

Hays said attorneys at Alston & Bird are encouraged to read industry trade journals and meet with colleagues in their industry groups to discuss developments and issues in their given field.

“Our lawyers are reading the same things as the people they work for are reading and thinking about,” Hays said. “We also invest in a meaningful understanding of the client's business, and we are fortunate that our clients recognize that there are enormous efficiencies in that.”

Foley & Lardner also urges its attorneys to invest time and energy in developing client relationships, Williams said. For example, attorneys are encouraged to spend nonbilled hours getting to know clients by participating in clients' management programs and earnings calls.

“We think the more invested we are in clients and their businesses, the more valuable we can be to them,” Williams said. “That helps clients achieve what they want to achieve, but also lets us do it efficiently.”

At DLA Piper, which ranks fifth on BTI's list, understanding a client's business and culture is the No. 1 priority, said Terry O'Malley, the firm's managing partner in the U.S.

“We invest a lot of time and energy in understanding a client's business and culture,” O'Malley said. “Part of that is training lawyers to be good listeners, and being willing to invest in activities that are not in themselves financially remunerative.”

Communication and Responsiveness

Another key factor to standout client service is maintaining open lines of communication between attorneys and clients.

BTI's Rynowecer said that the top-ranked firms not only engaged clients for feedback, but also evolved in response to that feedback.

At Alston & Bird, attorneys are encouraged to seek feedback when matters are concluded, Hays said. But the firm also incorporates an ongoing feedback mechanism into each engagement, in order to catch and resolve potential issues before they grow.

“If something happens along the way and the client wants to give feedback, they know who to call and that person will do something about it,” Hays said.

According to the top-ranking firms, effective communication also means making sure attorneys to get back to clients quickly — and with answers.

“One of the things we pride ourselves on is being responsive to clients,” said John Majoras, a partner at Jones Day, which landed in second place. “When a client has a need, it's an important need to them at that point in time, and we will be responsive to that. It's instilled in all of our lawyers, whether they started with us or are lateral hires.”

But responsiveness is more than just a call back, Majoras said. “We will return a phone call with something that meets the clients needs, whether that's a partner, or a substantive knowledge of the matter.”

Open lines of communication can help lawyers better understand their client's business, which in turn allows attorneys to interact with clients in a proactive way, said Tom Cole, chairman of Sidley Austin, one of only three firms to make BTI's client service top-30 list for nine years running.

“It's going to a client and saying, 'this is something you ought to be looking at, and we would be happy to do it,’” Cole said.

The superior firms go beyond easy access and quick responses, actively bringing clients into the firm for training and partnership-building exercises.

Cole said Sidley Austin makes its continuing legal education programs available to in-house counsel, and holds a number of client-centered annual events, such as a general counsel roundtable and litigation skills course.

Alston & Bird also brings in corporate counsel to participate in an array of panels and programs, Hays said. For example, the firm brought in CEOs as part of a training program that was focused on client service.

“We got to hear from them directly, and that was very valuable,” Hays said. “We are also drawing on that to incorporate it into our training — it institutionalizes some of the behaviors we want.”

At DLA Piper, attorneys are placed in-house to learn directly from clients, said O'Malley said, adding that the firm also joins with clients in community-building projects around the globe.

“We believe in partnering with clients in ways that allow us to better understand their culture and allow us to provide better solutions to clients' needs,” O'Malley said.

Service-Centered Firm Culture

The firms at the top of BTI's client service list all make client service a top priority, and have fostered firmwide cultures and practices intended to further that goal.

“The top firms are very client-focused,” Rynowecer said. “Generally speaking, the approach of putting clients first is not partner-specific, but done across the board, and that is actually fairly unusual.”

Rynowecer said he has heard from corporate counsel that when they are staffing projects, the top-ranked firms look across the entire spectrum of attorneys to come up with the best possible team, and “not just at the attorneys on their own floor.”

Alston & Bird takes that exact approach when putting together teams, Hays said.

“From my standpoint, when I am building teams and recruiting lateral partners, I think exclusively about how I can strengthen the particular team so it gives the client what it needs,” Hays said. “I feel very strongly about it, because we are a service business. That's what we do, and it often gets lost among firms that their core mission is to serve clients.”

Hays added that Alston & Bird also maintains a robust alumni network, and that many former attorneys who are now general counsel actively participate in the firm's panels and programs.

Jim Pagliaro, a managing partner at Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP, which is also in its ninth year in BTI's top 30, said the firm's culture of teamwork reflects positively among clients.

“The firm has really made a strong effort to consistently team people across practices and offices,” Pagliaro said. “It's part of our DNA. We don't run the firm as a cult of personalities — we value and reward teamwork. If it's part of your culture naturally, it's something you will do with clients as well.”

DLA Piper has made significant investments in technology that allows attorneys to access the firm's accumulated knowledge around the globe.

“The firm was built on the assumption and belief that clients increasingly require global solutions and addressing clients needs across geographies and across cultures

requires a nuanced understanding of the client's business," DLA Piper's O'Malley said. "The answers that work in one jurisdiction may not work in others, and we invest a lot in tools that allow our lawyers to collaborate across geographies so that we can provide comprehensive solutions for our clients."

Nine Years Of Excellence

Three firms — Sidley Austin, Jones Day and Morgan Lewis — received special commendation for appearing on BTI's top-30 list for nine years, as long as the consulting firm has been putting together the rankings.

"They have a relentless commitment to client focus and understanding the client," Rynowecer said. "They get up in the morning and think about what their client needs — it's just as important to them as profits per partner."

In particular, the long-running top rankers have learned that they can improve their profits by making client service a top priority, and including client focus in their partner reviews, Rynowecer said.

Jones Day's Majoras said clients' demands and needs have changed over the last decade, but the firm has adapted to continue its track record of excellent service.

"I think clients have become more demanding over time, and I'd like to think the type of relationship we have with clients is what makes them more demanding," Majoras said. "They see what they can get and then up their overall demand."

Pagliari of Morgan Lewis, which landed at 15 this year, attributed the firm's success to its commitment to building long-term relationships with clients, and its depth and diversity of practices.

"It's fairly basic stuff," Sidley Austin's Cole said. "It's wanting to be known for your client services, and having the skills and culture to facilitate that. It's recognizing that it can be a competitive advantage — and it's a competitive world out there."