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Foley, Alston & Bird Top List For Client Focus

By **Julie Zeveloff**

Law360, New York (November 16, 2009) -- Corporate counsel say they want a law firm that, above all else, knows their business and understands their particular objectives, according a new report. The top-ranked law firms are responding by training their attorneys to step into clients' shoes.

A new [report](#) from the BTI Consulting Group (Wellesley, Mass.) ranks Foley & Lardner LLP and Alston & Bird LLP as the firms most frequently cited by corporate counsel as exceptionally committed to client focus. Those firms, as well as Baker Botts LLP, were named in the report as the firms that best understand their clients' business.

The scores were culled from the feedback of 240 corporate counsel at Fortune 1000 companies, and published as part of BTI's Client Service A-Team, an annual report that recognizes 30 law firms that received corporate counsel's highest ratings across a range of criteria.

One shared attribute among the top firms in these categories was a renewed commitment to client service. In the past five years, both Alston & Bird and Foley & Lardner have brought in outsiders to help revamp their client service initiatives.

Alston & Bird managing partner Richard Hays said the combined process of hiring a consultant, bringing together firm leadership and devoting more time and resources to client service helped the firm reach a new level of excellence.

“There was value in getting on the same page,” Hays said. “That resulted in our institutionalizing certain behaviors, and incorporating those behaviors into our training, expectations and compensation system.”

Foley & Lardner engaged Scott Klug, a former U.S. congressman and television journalist, to find out how clients perceived the firm and the legal industry, as well as what they sought from the attorneys they hired.

“The information he brought back prompted us to create tools and processes to try and be more responsive,” said Sandy Williams, a partner at Foley & Lardner.

Understanding the Client's Business

Law firms that best understand a client's business provide outstanding legal advice in the context of the client's business and business environment, according to BTI's report.

Ranking a tier below Alston & Bird, Foley & Lardner and Baker Botts, seven firms — DLA Piper, Hunton & Williams LLP, Jones Day, Kirkland & Ellis LLP, Mayer Brown LLP, Sidley Austin LLP and Winston & Strawn LLP — were also commended for their commitment to understanding their clients' business.

92 firms made BTI's honor roll in this category.

A need to understand the client's business “has always been there, but it has never been quite so acute,” BTI Consulting President Michael B. Rynowecer said of the rise of that activity as a differentiating factor in overall client service.

He attributed the change to increased volatility in the markets, which he said prompted companies to realize they cared more about internal goings-on and relationships with trade partners than the overall economy.

According to Rynowecer, two types of firms tend to excel at understanding a client's business – those that dedicate business development money to getting to know their clients, and those that engage in years of ongoing systematic client feedback to gain a deep knowledge of their clients' changing goals, pressures and needs.

At Alston & Bird, an infrastructure organized — at least in part — around industry lines has helped attorneys really get to know the distinct areas of their clients' businesses, Hays said.

“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,” Hays said. “We have vertically integrated teams of practitioners that understand that industry.”

He added that the firm urges its attorneys 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 encourages its attorneys to spend nonbilled time becoming intimately familiar with their clients and their clients' industries, Williams said.

Among other activities, Foley & Lardner attorneys go through the management processes clients use for their own personnel, participate in clients' Six Sigma programs and keep up-to-date on public information about their clients.

“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.”

Bart Showalter, the firmwide head of Baker Botts' IP department, said client service was a principal focus of the firm's two most recent strategic plans, including one completed this year.

One of the Baker Botts' most effective tools for communicating with clients is its Extranet, an online forum that is accessible to lawyers from the firm and the client, said Showalter, noting that the program “allows us to be very integrated with our clients in an everyday, collaborative way.”

Showalter said Baker Botts collects feedback from clients both informally, as part of client team meetings throughout an engagement, and formally, through client interviews with senior lawyers who are not necessarily part of the client team.

The firm also dedicates itself to understanding clients' business by sending lawyers to spend time in clients' offices and participating in clients' in-house lawyer retreats, Showalter said.

Terry O'Malley, DLA Piper's U.S. managing partner, said the key to understanding a client's business was to be a good listener, and that the firm invested substantial time and energy training its attorneys in the skill of listening.

“You must understand what the client's goals are,” O'Malley said. “You also need to understand the client's culture, and how they like to go about their business. Of course, you need to ask for straightforward feedback on how they perceive your performance, but if you understand the client's business and culture, the likelihood you will provide solutions and value is much higher.”

Client Focus

Law firms that excel at client focus demonstrate a clear ability to understand and meet client objectives for the case, project or matter at hand and overall, according to the report.

Eight firms — Covington & Burling LLP, Debevoise & Plimpton LLP, DLA Piper, Holland & Knight LLP, Jones Day, Morrison & Foerster LLP, Perkins Coie LLP and Vinson & Elkins LLP — made BTI's "leaders of the best" list for client focus, and 97 firms were listed on BTI's honor roll in that category.

Client focus is "really understanding all the aspects of what the client is trying to achieve," Rynowecer said. "It's the idea of understanding the client's objective constraints and concerns, and providing counsel in the context of that."

But client focus also has another component — a willingness to share with clients, in a friendly but frank way, if its objectives are unrealistic, according to Rynowecer.

"What clients really want, most of the time, is business advice with their legal advice," he explained.

Foley & Lardner's Williams said that helping clients to set and achieve practical goals was a natural part of client focus.

"The approach of our firm, generally, is to take a can-do approach — to work with clients to try and explore all the ways for potentially accomplishing an objective," Williams said. "But ultimately, it's important for us to help a client understand if it's not something they can actually do."

John Majoras, a partner at Jones Day, said the firm had underscored its commitment to client focus by setting up an internal incentive system that was completely geared towards clients' interests.

In doing so, Jones Day has instilled in its attorneys a sense that the client does not belong to individual lawyers, but to the firm, and that the firm's entire array of resources are available to that client, said Majoras.